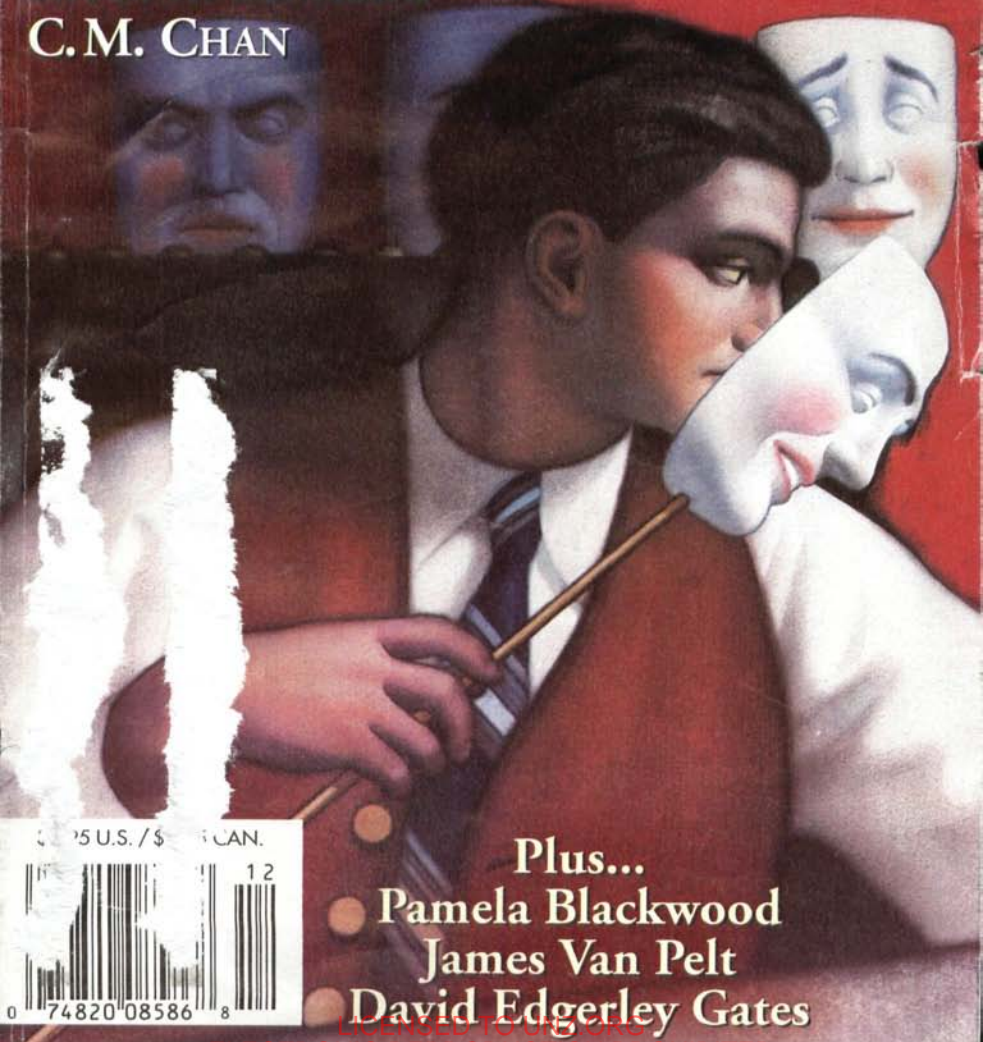


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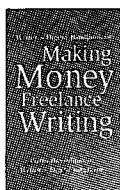
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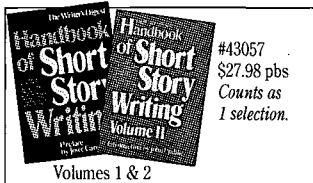
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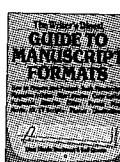


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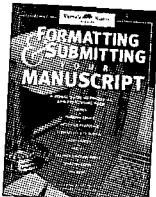
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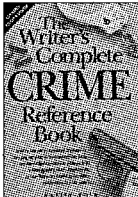
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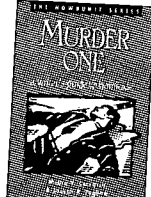
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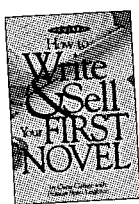
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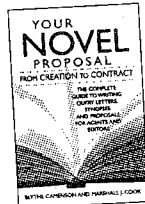
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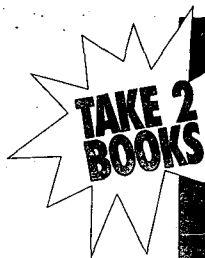
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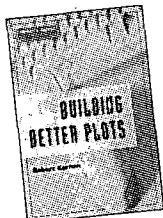
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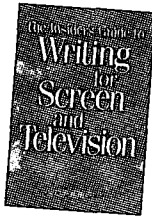


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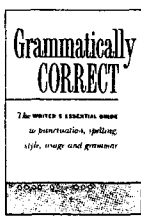
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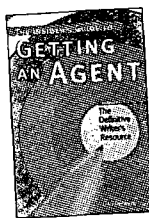
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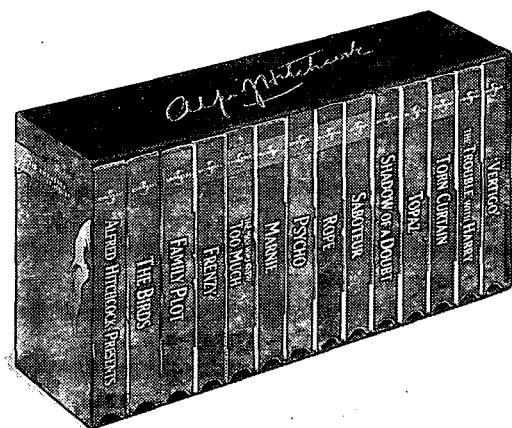
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

James Van Pelt, author of the surprising and eerie tale "Once They Were Monarchs," brings us his first mystery story, but he has also written stories for our sister magazine *Analog*, *Weird Tales*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and many other publications and was a finalist in 1999 for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. In addition, he has worked as a newspaperman and has written reviews and articles on genre publishing. In his day job he is a high school and college English teacher; he lives in Colorado.

"When I'm not teaching or writing," he says, "I'm a busy father [of three. When I was in high school and college, I spent many long, thoughtful days in the lifeguard's chair contemplating the world. My family thinks I tell a pretty good bedtime story."

If the lifeguarding experience

comes in handy in this new story, we hope it does so only in part!

Mike Wiecek's chilling story, "The Good Daughter," is his first publication. "I've worked in high-tech finance for five years; my current role (as vice president, Business Development) is focused on cutting deals for the Internet arm of Fidelity Investments. Previous jobs have included stints at Boston's transit agency and in Japan's largest media conglomerate. I lived for more than two years in Tokyo, and I've spent about the same amount of time traveling in Asia and the South Pacific—from Tibet to Tahiti. I volunteer on the board of Harvest Food Co-op ('Food for People, Not for Profit'), and I'm an accomplished juggler."

C. M. Chan, author of "The Model Murders," has a good Web site, where you can find out more about Bethancourt and his friends. Go to <http://home.att.net/~c.chan>.

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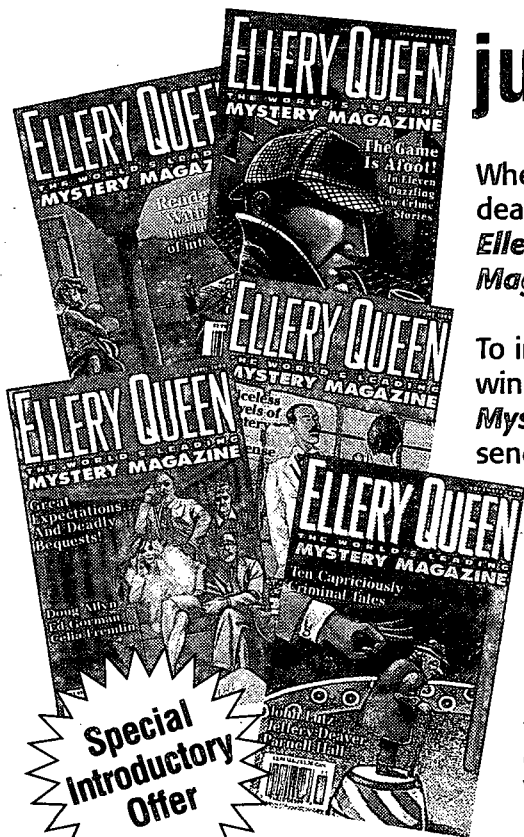
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FICTION

This Little Piggy

David Edgerley Gates

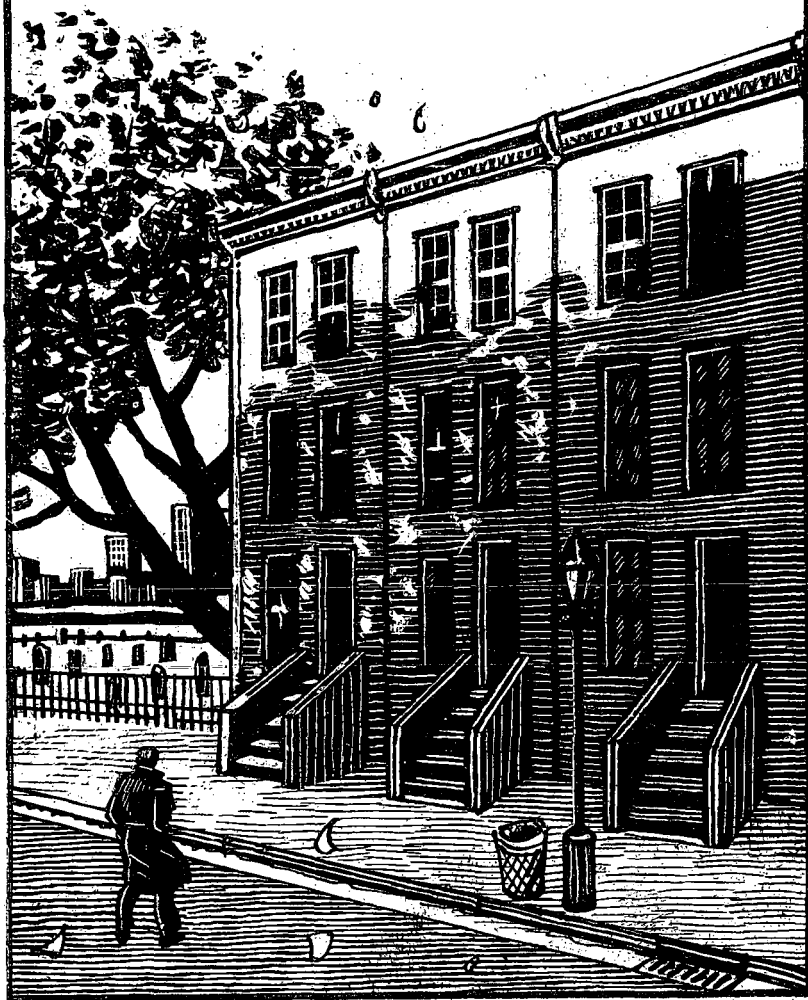


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/00

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Over the Memorial Day weekend some person or persons unknown shot Turk MacNamara twice in the back of the head with a .22 autoloader while he was sitting behind the wheel of his Buick Electra with the motor running. It was later established that he'd been killed about five o'clock that Sunday morning and that whoever did it was sitting in the car with him. Turk was parked in the driveway of his house on Fayerweather Street, and it was his younger daughter Sandy, slipping out on the front porch in her Pocahontas pajamas to bring in the *Globe*, who noticed the exhaust still coming out of the tailpipe and found her father hunched over the steering column in an attitude of prayer, his hands folded demurely in his lap and his brains stuck to the dashboard. The front seats in the Buick smelled of urine.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town a couple of doors down from an after-hours club on Western Avenue called Third World Uhuru, three crack dealers in Rastafarian drag got whacked out by some shooters in a passing car. According to witnesses, the victims had been standing next to a Cadillac hearse passing a joint back and forth and doing the dozens on each other, and never knew what hit them. The general consensus was that the shooters had used an Ingram or an Uzi or maybe both, since Ballistics dug some hundred or more slugs out of the rear fender skirts of the Caddy. There was some initial disagreement over whether to tag the killings as drug related, but the spent

rounds and recovered shell casings turned out to be nine-millimeter, and what that suggested to the dicks on the scene was a turf war between the rival Jamaican gangs known as posses, whose weapons of choice were the Browning High-Power and the Ingram MAC-10, this last a blowback burp gun formerly favored by the U.S. Treasury Department for Secret Service work but now widely available on the street, usually equipped with a muzzle suppressor and high-capacity magazines. In the end that was enough to classify the so-called Rub-a-Dub Murders as narcotics homicides.

What one thing had to do with the other, however, was anybody's guess, and least of all mine.

MACNAMARA, Thos. Patrick. In Cambridge, May 29th; husband of Mary Ellen (Prescott); father of Penelope and Alexandra. Funeral services will be private.

"The point is," Dugan was saying, "Turk MacNamara may have been a leading contender for the world's biggest slab of prime rectum and he was no friend of mine, but I did tend to think of him as a still point in a turning world."

"You maybe," I said, knocking back my Bushmill's and signaling the bartender for another round. "I always figured he'd end up on those mudflats off the Lynnway wearing cement shoes."

Dugan grinned. Dugan was a cop, after all. "Give the man credit for a little more animal cunning than that," he said, and took a long pull on his lager-and-lime.

"Why didn't he see it coming?" I asked. "Here's a guy who started out running numbers in Somerville, then he's the bag man for the sports book out of North Cambridge, and pretty soon he's on a first-name basis with most of the major players in the metropolitan Boston area. Turk did people favors, and he had a lot of markers to call in. He knew where the bodies were buried."

Dugan shrugged. "I'm not claiming Turk wasn't mobbed up," he said, "or that your average dink wouldn't make this as a professional hit, but where does it get me?"

"Don't horse me around, Frank," I told him. "If you guys could pin this on a couple of traveling garlic salesmen from Providence, that'd be an end to it. Or you could at least write it off. What's got a bug in your ear?"

"There's nothing on the street to suggest any of the wiseguys had a beef with Turk," he said. "Not the Irish down in Savin Hill, none of your North Shore mafiosi, nobody. In fact I've got a source who claims the Provenzano family has put out a bounty, looking for information on Turk's killing. Then again that might be a smoke screen."

"Maybe, but it could backfire," I said. "I doubt if the Provenzanos are that sophisticated. Mob guys think muscle, not reverse psychology."

"Well, the old man might try putting some spin on the ball, but he's in Club Fed, doing time at Danbury."

"Who's running the show if Tony P's inside?"

"His kid, the one they call Baby Doc."

"I rest my case," I told him. Baby Doc Provenzano was a throwback by all accounts, the kind who stuffed a canary in a dead man's mouth as a warning against squealers. He'd probably watched his collection of *Godfather* videos too many times.

Dugan leaned away from the bar and studied an old list of lunch specials displayed on the chalkboard. "There's a memorial service for Turk tomorrow," he remarked. "You going?"

"Turk and I weren't close," I said.

"You and Polly Prescott were an item, I hear tell, once upon a time," he said, off-handedly.

I wasn't fooled. "Is that what this is about?" I asked.

"I thought you might be able to cosy up to the widow, yeah. Pull rank, so to speak."

"You're barking up the wrong tree. In the first place, whoever popped Turk might have done Polly a good turn in the long run. I know how that sounds, but there it is."

"And in the second place?"

"I don't like trying to sneak in under Polly's radar," I told him.

"This from a guy who hangs around cheap motels with a Polaroid?"

I didn't do divorce work, but I took his point.

The wake was being held at the big Prescott house on Avon Hill, although "wake" is a misnomer, since Turk was already in the ground, not laid out in an open casket—not that an open casket had been an option. Wakes are more of a Catholic tradition in any case, and Kendall Prescott was Episcopalian, intolerant of anything that smacked

of popery. Like me, Turk had long since lapsed from the church, but maybe Kendall was indulging himself in a certain ghoulish pleasure, dancing on Turk's grave metaphorically speaking. Kendall hadn't approved of Turk as a match for Polly any more than he'd approved of me. She was his only daughter, and he'd been ferociously possessive. I was a working-class Canuck from out Leominster way, without breeding or prospects, and Kendall was relieved when Polly and I broke up. Turk was even more unsuitable, of course, being Irish. I think Kendall always figured we were some sort of phase she was going through and sooner or later she'd come to her senses, but Polly was stubborn and she stuck with Turk. Maybe it was because she thought she should live with it out of pride, since the choice was hers, not her father's. I'm not pretending to understand how any of this came about, simply that it did. Our personal histories seem inevitable only in hindsight.

Polly Prescott MacNamara looked none the worse for wear, however. She wasn't dressed in widow's weeds but in something subdued and expensive from Lord & Taylor. I waited for a chance to talk to her alone, but she beat me to it.

"Hello, Jack," she said, walking over with a highball glass in her hand. "Long time, no see."

"Polly," I said, smiling foolishly. She had that effect on me. "Sorry about Turk."

"You'd be about the only one," she remarked, but without real malice. She took a sip of her drink. It was very pale and slightly fizzy. She

must have been pacing herself. The glass was sweating on the outside. She had a cocktail napkin wrapped around the base. "Is that why you're here, to offer condolences for Turk?" she inquired.

"In a manner of speaking," I said. I told her some of what Frank Dugan had told me.

Polly knew Turk was crooked, of course, but she'd always kept her distance from the business end of things. Turk didn't bring his work home with him, or at least he hadn't until now. The fact that he'd been shot pretty much on his own doorstep was a breach of etiquette and might have been meant as a warning.

But if that was the case, who was being warned? I was reluctant to bring this last point up with Polly.

She'd already been interviewed by the cops, several times in fact, and had nothing much to add. Turk didn't keep the best of company. Chickens had come home to roost. End of story.

"You think?" I asked her.

"I don't know what to think," Polly said. "Why would Frank Dugan recruit you to pick my brains?"

"Frank's not convinced the mob ordered the hit," I said.

Polly looked skeptical. "Who else had reason to kill him?" she asked.

"I was hoping you'd have some ideas on that score."

She smiled lopsidedly. "If I thought about that, I might resent the implication," she said. "We had our ups and downs, Turk and me. Mostly downs the last couple of years. The truth is, I'm not surprised at what happened. I suppose

I should be mourning him, but I'm actually relieved. It's an ugly way to have things end, and it doesn't speak very well for me that what I feel is embarrassment, not grief."

"Inconsiderate of Turk to get himself killed right in front of the house like that instead of offstage," I said.

"I never wished him dead, Jack," she said and turned away. I'd come only to see Polly, and in particular I wanted to avoid any unpleasantness with her father, but he waylaid me as I was edging toward the door. Kendall Prescott was pushing seventy, tall and lean and very fit for his age, with unpuckered skin and that pampered complexion of the ruling class.

"Well, I swan," he announced cheerfully. He was already a good three sheets to the wind.

I nodded uneasily.

Kendall looked around. "Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it, wouldn't you say?" he inquired. Polly's dad was a coldblooded bastard, right enough, but he was no hypocrite, I had to give him that.

"This isn't the place," I said.

"What better place?" he demanded. "I just wanted to rub it in a little."

"Do it on your own time," I told him.

"And who do you think's paying for the goddamn liquor?" he wanted to know. "Come on, Jack, hoist a glass."

"Do yourself a favor, Kendall."

He looked puzzled. "You're the better man, Jack. You were always the better man. Better than that goddamn Harp."

I took him by the arm and steered

him into a corner. "Just leave it alone, for Christ's sake," I said fiercely. He tipped his head back, trying to focus down the bridge of his nose. "You won this one," I reminded him.

He thought it over. "Yes, I did," he said, smiling slowly. "I got my girl back."

I glanced over in her direction. She was talking with a guy I thought I knew, a heavysset guy with red hair. It took me a minute to place him. Leo Zachary.

"Well, hey, no skin off your nose, Jack," Kendall remarked.

"Am I right or am I right?"

Kendall Prescott's undisguised glee at his son-in-law's death was leaving a bad taste in my mouth. I felt queasy and cranky and just plain fed up. I left him standing there in the corner and left his house, I was thinking, for the last time.

I was thinking about something else, too. I hadn't recognized Leo Zachary right away because seeing him at the Prescotts' was somehow out of context, the way you meet somebody in the supermarket, say, and you're used to seeing them under different circumstances, at the gym or the office, maybe, and you don't make the connection. In this case I'd remembered Leo Zachary from a hockey game. This was a couple of years ago when my brother Tony was still playing for the Bruins, before he was injured. Zachary had been back near the locker rooms, in the corridors underneath the stands and nobody got past security in the Garden without a pass, so Zachary knew somebody, or had the juice. Of course, he could

have simply been a fan—plenty of guys liked hockey, especially back then when Boston had a shot at the Stanley Cup pretty much every season—but it didn't feel like that at the time. The image I conjured up in my mind's eye was of two guys talking, Zachary and somebody else. But the somebody else was a blank, his back turned. A cashmere overcoat, an Astrakhan hat, a bright woolen scarf. The Garden was always either overheated or freezing. I couldn't make out what they were saying. The words echoed off the concrete, distorting their sense.

That was all I had, just a snapshot. But someone must have given me Zachary's name, then or later, and there had to be a reason it stayed with me.

There was another reason I was puzzling over Leo Zachary. Not just that he'd come to pay his respects to Turk but how he and Polly had talked. There was something guarded about their body language. I hadn't put my finger on it, but afterwards it struck me that they'd acted not unlike secret lovers who've met accidentally and have to pretend there's nothing going on between them.

I'd parked on Linnaean Street; two guys were waiting for me when I got back to my car. One of them was obvious muscle, a big bruiser wearing chino slacks and a dark windbreaker pulled down past his waistline, probably to conceal a weapon. The other guy was less obvious, tall and slender, and turned out very dapper in an Ivy League

outfit, grey flannel bags and a J. Press blazer. I'd never seen either one of them before.

The fashion plate introduced himself. "Johnny Vigorino," he told me with a self-deprecating smile. "They call me Johnny Vig." He shrugged. "Go figure. You'd be Jack Thibault."

I said I was.

"Here's the thing, Jack," he went on. "There's a guy I know, he's got what you'd call a personal interest in this Turk MacNamara business. You follow me?"

"No," I said.

Johnny Vig sighed.

"I really don't want to go into the details, okay? Suffice it to say my guy's unhappy."

"All right," I said. "So Baby Doc Provenzano's got his panties in a bunch. What's that to me?"

It was a shot in the dark, but Johnny Vig didn't look surprised. "He'd make it worth your while," he said. "It might be to your advantage, you getting on his good side."

"He'd make *what* worth my while?" I asked.

"Keeping him in the loop," Johnny Vig said. "You turn anything up, you pass it along."

"I can't say I'm enthusiastic about the idea."

"I get that a lot," he said. He grinned at me.

I didn't doubt it. "Assuming you people didn't smoke him in the first place, how come the Provenzanos are so concerned about how Turk died?" I asked. "His line of work, it seems like an occupational hazard."

Johnny Vig spread his hands. "I was told to deliver the message," he

said. "That's all I know. I were you, I'd take it serious."

I thought about it. "How do I find you?" I asked him.

"Not to worry," he said, still smiling. "I'm easy to find. Ask around. Everyone knows Johnny Vigorino."

I called Frank Dugan to bring him up to speed. He found it interesting that the Provenzanos had sent somebody as important as Johnny Vig. He was reportedly big in delinquent collections.

"Turk was a money guy," I reminded him. "He was good with numbers, everybody trusted him not to pad his percentage, and he knew how to avoid the currency-reporting requirements."

"Where are you going with this?" Dugan asked.

"Two possible scenarios," I said. "First off, if Turk was skimming, the Provenzanos would kill him as an object lesson. But they wouldn't just shoot him and leave the body in front of his house, not until they pulled out his fingernails and got him to tell them where he'd hidden the money."

"I read you," Dugan said.

"What if somebody was in on it with him, and his partner took him down before the Provenzanos had a chance to give Turk a manicure with a blowtorch and a pair of pliers?"

"Not bad," Dugan said. "It explains why they want to know who was with Turk when he died, since it wasn't them."

"Supposedly," I said. "Here's another scenario. Turk had some kind of action going on the side."

"Such as?"

"I wouldn't know. Cooking somebody's books, burying their profits. Something with a higher risk factor than his usual run of trade, in exchange for a bigger share of the gross."

"Funny you should mention that," Dugan said. "I've had a parade of people in and out of my office, suits mostly, and they were none too subtle about the late Mr. MacNamara."

"Somebody's got an interest other than Homicide?"

"The Feds."

"Methinks this bodes ill."

"You ain't just whistling Dixie," Dugan said. "It's my can on the line, they find out I got a civilian working the case."

"Your can? I don't want to be looking at an obstruction of justice beef. I'd like to keep my license."

There was a thoughtful pause. "I think we could get around that," he said as if it had just occurred to him.

I knew where he was headed. "Why don't you write me up as a CS?" I suggested. If he had me on the books as a Confidential Source, it would give both of us a little wiggle room.

"It probably won't stand serious scrutiny," Dugan said.

"Then let's avoid getting scrutinized."

"Your profile's already a little higher than either of us might like," he said.

"Because of Johnny Vig and the Provenzanos?" I asked.

"No, because you're already on the radar on the fifth floor of the JFK Building."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Frank," I

said. "You ratted me out to the Feebs?"

"I didn't have anything to do with it," he said, "and it's not the Bureau, it's somebody at Treasury."

"Where'd you come by this?"

"I got it from the horse's mouth. An administrator over at ATF called this morning and asked me where you fit in."

"So naturally you gave me up."

"As a matter of fact, no. Not that I couldn't have scored some points if I had, but they might be more likely to tip their hand if I held you in reserve, so to speak."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"Look, the Feds never share information with the locals," he said. "They figure us for a bunch of rubes. The only way to get anything out of them is to have something to trade."

"Why is ATF interested in the Turk MacNamara killing?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Dugan said.

We met at Government Center. Back in the 1960's the city had razed Scollay Square, a tough little pocket that was home to the Old Howard burlesque, among other places, which made the area a magnet for sailors off the navy vessels that docked in Charlestown. Now it was an enormous plaza fronted by city hall and the federal building. It was sunny and windswept, busy with pedestrian traffic, but too big and impersonal to be inviting. People didn't dawdle there. The urban designers had envisioned a modern agora perhaps, but they'd left out any of the modesty that might have made that work. The archi-

tecture reminded me of public works in former Soviet satellite countries.

I shouldn't have been surprised that the agent from Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms was a woman. Dugan had probably looked forward to sandbagging me. She was tall, full-figured, and handsomely dressed. Frank introduced us. Her name was Dottie DiNapoli. Her relationship with Dugan seemed almost flirtatious. She suggested we walk down to the Haymarket for lunch.

It was Dottie's treat, or rather her agency's, so we didn't go to Durgin-Park and tuck into oysters Rockefeller and prime rib. We settled for pizza by the slice off paper plates, washed down with Dr. Pepper, and ice cream cones for dessert. Dottie let me get two scoops, with jimmies. I figured she was feeding me the spoonful of molasses before she gave me the sulfur, and I was right, after a fashion.

"Frank thinks we can help each other," she said.

"I'm not sure Frank's the best judge of that."

Dottie laughed. "Let me put it another way," she said. "I could use *your* help."

"What do I get out of it?" I asked.

"Well, there's the rub," Dottie admitted. "I don't really have anything to offer other than my good will, and I don't know how much that's worth to you."

At least she was honest about it. "I thought this was more of a carrot-and-the-stick deal," I said, smiling.

"Actually, it is," she said. "I mean,

I could probably make problems for you if I put my mind to it. But doesn't that seem like an awful waste of energy? By the same token, I could be a friend in need somewhere down the road. You might want me in your corner, push comes to shove."

I thought about it. "You're offering me something like a line of credit, is that it?"

"Or maybe just giving you enough rope," she said.

"Whatever," Dugan broke in. "But now that you two have met cute, can we cut to the chase?"

We both looked at him.

Dugan didn't seem at all embarrassed. "Let's get some work done," he said. "Any problem with that?"

Dottie shrugged. "Okay," she said. She looked back at me. "You and Turk MacNamara were friends—"

"We knew each other," I cut in. "We weren't friends."

"I stand corrected," she said. "You and Polly MacNamara are close, though, as I understand it. I realize this is a sore spot, but is there an opening there we can exploit?"

"I've already been over this with Frank," I told her. "You guys are spinning your wheels."

"I know it's asking a lot," Dottie said.

"Why are you doing it, then?"

"I was building what could have been a strong case before MacNamara's untimely demise, and now I've got diddly-squat," she said. "I need some kind of handle, a way back in."

"What did ATF have on Turk?"

Dottie studied me for a minute. She was obviously trying to decide how much of it she could give away,

and I hadn't given her any help. She sighed and took the plunge.

"This little piggy went wee-wee-wee, all the way home," she said, looking at me carefully.

It took me a second. "Jesus," I blurted. "Turk was an informer?"

Dugan looked as startled as I was, but he recovered faster.

"You're a piece of work, DiNapoli," he said, shaking his head.

"Thanks," Dottie said.

"It wasn't meant as a compliment."

"Turk was ready to rat out the Provenzanos?" I asked.

"That's not my department," she said.

"What exactly *is* your department?"

"Illegal guns," she said.

I didn't get it. Dugan, on the other hand, seemed to have some idea where she was coming from. "Let me get this straight," he said. "You people are looking at the Rub-a-Dub killings?"

"That caught our attention, yes," Dottie said. "Somebody's providing the street gangs with high-end automatic weapons."

Dugan looked at me. "I don't see Turk in this picture," he remarked.

"Me, either," I said. "He didn't get his hands dirty."

"He handled a lot of dirty money," Dottie said.

"Aha," Dugan said. "The light dawns."

Not for me, it hadn't. "You want to clue me in here?" I asked Dottie. "You're saying Turk was laundering money for some gun-runner? I don't see it. It's too far off his graze."

"Why's it so hard to feature?"

Dottie asked me. "Turk knew the ropes. He could set up a dummy corporation, offshore accounts. He might have used some already-existing mechanism. It was his area of expertise, Jack."

"But it doesn't fit the guy," I said stubbornly.

"Depends how hungry he was," Dugan said. "Or how desperate he might have been to cop a plea." He looked at Dottie. "How did you turn him?" he asked. "What did you use for leverage, to jack him up and jump-start his engine?"

"We didn't," she said.

"You didn't what?"

"We didn't have anything on him. He was a walk-in."

"Turk came to *you*?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"That's right."

I was having trouble getting it to make sense. "Who was he going to give up?" I asked.

"He didn't say. Turk claimed he didn't have his ducks in a row yet. He had to set it up."

"You mean Turk MacNamara was going to run a sting for you?" Dugan demanded. "Make a buy?"

"More than just a buy," Dottie said.

"All of it," I suggested.

"The seller, the merchandise, the financing, the whole nine yards," she said, nodding.

"So he was your inside guy?"

"Turk was keeping the books and rolling over the cash."

"What did he get in return?"

"Use immunity. He couldn't be prosecuted for any illegal activity he took part in if he testified about it, and we agreed he didn't have to

testify about other, unrelated activities."

"Like the Provenzanos," I said.

"Exactly."

"Now, that's a sweetheart of a deal," Dugan said. "Too bad it got him killed."

"Too bad for us, that's for sure," Dottie said.

"Turk might have seen things differently," I commented.

"I didn't lose any sleep over it," Dottie told me.

My brother Tony had been in a wheelchair for a couple of years now since he'd gotten hurt in the third quarter of a playoff game with Montreal and four guys carried him off the ice. His physical rehab was a long haul, but recovering his spirit turned out to be just as hard. Maybe things would have been different if our father had still been alive but Dad had died the year Tony turned pro, so Tony thought he had this impossible standard to live up to, and it took him a while to work past that.

The team paid his disability, and while obviously it wasn't what he'd have made on skates, it wasn't ungenerous, either. He paid his own freight at the managed care facility he'd parked in for rehabilitation, and we'd just found a small bungalow with an open floorplan for him to move into, on the Arlington line near Spy Pond. Tony was already packing. He looked forward to fending for himself.

I walked down the corridor to his room. His door was ajar, and I rapped on the jamb: shave-and-a-haircut-two-bits. He glanced up.

"Hey, buddy," he said. "What's up?" He was taping a box closed. There were a dozen more cartons stacked under the window.

"I've got something I want to run by you," I told him.

He studied me a little more closely. "You look like you've got a hair across your butt, Jack," he said.

"I just had lunch with Frank Dugan and a Treasury agent," I said. "The latest skinny on Turk MacNamara is that Turk was in bed with the Feds. According to Treasury, Turk was about to rat out a blackmarket gun dealer when he got his ticket punched."

"Makes as much sense as anything else," Tony said. "No way the Provenzanos are involved?"

I hadn't told Tony about my encounter with Johnny Vig, yet.

I told him now.

"Another country heard from," Tony said with a thin smile. "You figure they're on the level?"

"I'm beginning to think so," I said. "But I don't know why they're so antsy."

"What was Turk's piece of this gun business?"

"He was handling the financial end, supposedly."

"Like a tax dodge? Or bank accounts in the Cayman Islands? A suitcase full of bearer bonds?"

"I don't understand the mechanics."

"Turk handled an awful lot of money for the mob, too," Tony said, musing.

"That's kind of an open secret."

"Well, what I'm thinking, if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

"I don't follow," I told him.

"Turk had a system in place," Tony explained. "Why would he change something if it already worked for him? So let's say he was supposed to be laundering money from gun deals. It's not any different from anything else, right? It's still money."

I saw what he was driving at. "You mean he might have put the gun money into the same pipeline he used for, say, Provenzano money, and if somebody were looking into the gun deals, following the money trail would give them a road map to the Provenzano operation."

"Bingo."

"It just seems like such a confusion of motives," I said.

"Speaking of which, what's *your* motive in all this, Jack?" my brother asked. "I don't want to get in past my depth, but is Polly MacNamara a factor here?"

"Everybody else seems to think so."

Tony shook his head and grinned. "You'll have to do better than that," he said.

"You know anything about a guy named Leo Zachary?"

"You're changing the subject."

"Not so's you'd notice," I told him.

Tony looked at me for a second, trying to figure out if I was blowing smoke his way. "There was a Leo Zachary who used to hang around the Garden," he said. "Fenway, too, I heard, maybe Foxboro. I don't know what his story was. I never had anything to do with him, so I never bothered to find out."

"You mean you heard enough not to want to hear more?"

"Something like that," Tony said,

warily. "You know how it is. Maybe the guy's an odds-maker. A bookie or a professional gambler. You're an athlete, you can't take that chance, getting chummy with those people. I mean, look at Pete Rose."

"Here's the thing," I said. "Leo Zachary was at Turk's funeral reception chatting up the widow. I kind of wondered whether Turk and Leo might have done business together. Oh, and my guess is that Polly's stepping out with him, too."

"Jesus, what a can of worms," he said, pulling a face. It took him a minute, but then the same thing occurred to Tony that had occurred to me. "You think it was going on before Turk was killed, don't you?" he asked me. "And you figure Turk found out about them."

"Well, it's a lot of supposing," I said, "but, yeah, that's about what I think."

"You going to ask Polly where she stands?"

"I didn't get very far talking to Polly," I said. "I might have better luck with Leo."

Tony sucked on his lower lip. "I don't know as that's such a hot idea, Jack. Leo Zachary's no wall-flower."

I nodded. "And you figure he's connected."

"If he's handling any kind of action on a large scale, he'd have to be," Tony said. "He's working the mob's turf."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"You watch your back," my brother said.

"Somebody has to," I told him.

Johnny Vig was as good as his

word. Down on Hanover Street in the North End, all I had to do was ask around. I wound up on a side street overlooking the Copp's Hill Burying Ground and the inner harbor beyond, in front of a place called the San Gennaro Social Club. It appeared to have fallen into desuetude, but I tried the bell. Late afternoon sun lit the tops of the sycamores in the old cemetery but left me in shadow. There was a breeze off the water. I felt the chill.

The door opened, and a young guy in an M.I.T. sweatshirt looked me up and down with suspicion. I didn't take it personally. It seemed generic. I would have been uptight, too, if the FBI's Organized Crime Division had me under round-the-clock surveillance. He beckoned me into the vestibule and patted me down in silence. I wasn't carrying, but he was more interested in whether I was wearing a wire.

The formalities taken care of, he led me through a fireproof inner door and down a narrow hallway past the stairs. It had once been a rowhouse, but it opened up in back. Bearing walls had been knocked out on either side and posted with timbers and masonry. The place actually included both adjoining buildings, and the narrow front entrance was a blind. Maybe it had been a speakeasy a couple of generations ago. We crossed the dancefloor. There was a raised bandstand at one end of the room and a marble bar along one side. The liquor racks on the backbar were empty. Our steps were loud on the dusty wood. We went through a set of swinging doors into the kitchen.

Johnny Vig was perched on a butcher block table in the middle of the kitchen, waiting for me. He must have checked me out when I rang the front bell. Maybe they had closed-circuit video. He swung his legs and hopped down onto the concrete floor. So far nobody had said a word. Johnny Vig motioned me to follow him and went over to the walk-in icebox. He held the door for me, we stepped inside, and he closed the door behind him with a clank. There was a single bare bulb in a wire cage overhead. The shelves in the walk-in were empty, but the compressor was on and the ambient temperature felt like the northern latitudes of Greenland. You could see your breath.

"What have you got for me, Jack?" Johnny Vig asked.

"Couple of questions," I said.

He looked put out but he shrugged. "Fire away," he said.

I looked around the inside of the refrigerator. The compressor hammered steadily, and the duckboards under our feet were vibrating. "What is this, anyway?" I asked him. "You figure we're safe from bugs in here?"

He waved that away. "Let's don't fool around," he said.

"Okay," I said. "What's the story with Leo Zachary?"

Johnny Vig frowned. "He's a bookie," he told me.

"Heavy action?"

He nodded. "Heavy enough."

"He do much business with Turk?"

"Off and on, probably, like everybody else. What's got you sniffing after Leo?"

"Leo's sniffing after Turk's wife," I said.

"You mean before or after?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say both."

He studied on it a second. "Well now, rumor has it that you and the Widow MacNamara were close," he said. "You wouldn't be trying to put Leo in bad odor because of that, would you?"

"Seems like everybody knows my business better than I do."

"No harm in asking," Johnny Vig said, grinning.

"Speaking of rumors, I heard Turk might have been set to go in front of a grand jury," I said.

That got his attention. "Spreading a story like that could be dangerous," he said. "Little pitchers have big ears."

"Some people might not want to take the chance it was a lot of birdseed."

"Yeah." Johnny Vig was thoughtful.

"Here's something else you might want to think about," I said. "Apparently somebody's cornered the market on submachine guns and they're selling them to the Jamaican gangs."

"Those freaking Jamaicans," he said. "Jesus, they're worse than the goddamn Russians. Crazy on dope, or just crazy."

"What about the guns?"

"Hell, there's a bunch of freelancers out there, Jack. You can't keep on top of it. It ain't like the old days."

I didn't know if that was altogether a bad thing, but I let it go. Besides, maybe he had a point.

"I mean, they never should of

broke up the phone company," he said. "You know? Monopolies are a necessary evil. Now what do you got? No discipline. No respect."

"In other words, you can't get a line on the supplier."

"I didn't say that. What I meant was, this business ain't what you call vertically integrated no more. Everybody's out to rob Peter so's to pay Paul." He sighed. "I can get people to ask around, but that's the best I can do, keep my ear to the ground. Thing is, I got no inside track with the posses. Rasta don't mix with pasta, you hear what I'm saying?"

The noise inside the walk-in was giving me a headache. My hands were jammed into my pockets, and condensation was freezing in my nostril hairs. "I hear you."

"What do you care about a bunch of ganja smokers into heavy weapons, anyway?" he asked.

"I think whoever sold them the guns whacked Turk," I said.

Johnny Vig nodded slowly to himself. "The money," he said. "Turk did the laundry. Why didn't I tumble to that?"

I figured he already had, but if he didn't want me to think so, I had no reason to call him on it and good reason not to.

"Your place or mine?" Polly Mac-Namara asked me.

She sounded pleased that I'd called. I suggested a college bar on Hampshire Street near Inman Square, and she agreed to meet me around seven thirty for drinks. We could negotiate when we got there whether to go for Chinese afterwards.

I showered and shaved and got dressed, clean jeans, a blue oxford shirt, and a tweed jacket. I chose the tweed jacket because I wanted to cover the .40 Smith I had holstered at the small of my back, inside my jeans. You don't take a gun to a meeting with the Mafia because you wouldn't get to keep it very long, but now I was back on my own turf.

I walked the six blocks from my apartment down to Inman Square. It was approaching dusk, the streetlights just coming on, and the air smelled of lilac. Cambridge is a great walking town, especially in late spring when everything's leafed out and in bloom. Toward the end of the day the light deepens and turns bronze and time slows and seems almost to inhale, holding its breath.

I was early, so I ordered a Beck's and nursed it while I waited for Polly. In the old days we probably would have met at The Plough and Stars, one of those places where you could count on some Irish patriot in exile talking treason to the Crown, all the romance and danger of life on the run, and hoping it got him into a Radcliffe girl's dorm. Not that such people don't exist, street toughs from Belfast, unforgiving veterans of hunger strikes and the Maze, but you weren't likely to overhear them bragging about it in a saloon. They were hard boys, not given to carelessness or sentimentality. Of course, puzzling over the Irish and their intractable difficulties got me nowhere. They hadn't made much progress themselves in the three hundred years

since the Battle of the Boyne. It was a funny thing for me to fix on, even in passing, but it reminded me that the past could be both elastic and brittle, deep water and thin ice. You could be pulled under without warning.

Everybody but me was convinced I was still carrying a torch for Polly, and now I was wondering whether I'd let it cloud my judgment. I didn't like people trying to push my buttons. But I had to admit it was easier to let sleeping dogs lie, and leave my feelings unexamined.

"Hi," Polly said at my elbow.

"Hi, yourself," I said. She'd caught me off-guard.

She took the stool next to mine and ordered a glass of fumé blanc. "So, what's the occasion, Jack?" she asked.

"I just wanted to know how you were getting along. I thought we parted on sort of a sour note, last time around."

"Well, the whole thing was pretty grim, let's face it," she said. "My dad was about the only one who got off on it."

I couldn't think of anything to say to that, so I didn't.

"I always hoped he'd mellow with age, but he just gets more ornery. Hateful, actually. There's no other word for it."

"I won't argue the point," I remarked. "Not that there was ever any love lost between us, but I think your father's probably scared."

"Of what, dying?"

"There's that," I admitted. "I was thinking more along the lines of his being unloved."

Polly studied me for a second and

then nodded. "He's been working at it most of his life," she said.

"That's a sad commentary."

"I'd feel sorry for him if he weren't so busy feeling sorry for himself," she said. "Can we change the subject?"

"Gladly," I said.

"Leo thinks you've got it in for him," she said.

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. Three or four things crossed my mind in reply, and I discarded all of them. You had to hand it to her. Frontal assault was what I least expected.

Polly took a sip of her wine. "Well?" she asked.

There wasn't much point in dissembling. "No," I said. "I asked around about him, yes. I wondered what his relationship with Turk might have been, whether or not it was business, apart from, ah, whatever they're calling it these days."

"Whatever they're calling what?"

"Doing the dirty with a dead man's wife," I said.

"Turk wasn't dead yet when Leo and I started doing it," she said.

"Oh," I said. "That makes all the difference, then."

"No, not *all* the difference," Polly said. "But maybe a small one." She was looking at me the way she'd look at something unpleasant she'd found on the bottom of her shoe. "Where do you get off anyway, Jack, with this high moral tone? I don't remember hearing you were elected pope. Get over yourself."

This conversation wasn't going my way. "You're right," I said. "It's none of my business. The whole

thing's just gotten too close to home."

She softened, slightly. "Turk and Leo were old buddies," she told me. "I suppose it never should have happened, but Turk was no angel, God knows. I needed somebody to talk to, and Leo was there to listen. Isn't that always the way? You never plan to wind up in bed with your husband's best friend."

"Turk and Leo were that tight?"

"They grew up together. A couple of Somerville townies."

Stickball and hooky, I was thinking. "Kids on corners," I suggested. "Opening fire hydrants in the hot weather."

She shrugged. "Tenement city, cold-water flats on the wrong side of the tracks."

There was more than one wrong side of the tracks, I knew.

Something was knocking around inside my head, just out of reach.

She shook her head. "I sure can pick 'em," she said.

"Thanks," I said.

"Oh hell, Jack," she muttered, embarrassed.

"When did Leo tell you I was getting in his face?" I asked.

"What?"

"When did you talk to him last?"

"Just before you called. I guess it was karma."

News travels fast, I thought. How soon after I'd talked to Johnny Vig did Johnny get word to Leo?

"Don't mix it up with Leo, Jack," Polly said.

"I'm not sure how to take that," I said.

"Things didn't work out between us," she said. "That's not your fault."

"I don't see where you're going," I said.

"God, stop thinking like a lawn ornament, Jack. You're not stupid. Leo's not the issue. *You* are."

Now it was unanimous.

Polly gathered up her handbag and got off the stool. "I'll see you around, Jack," she said, and walked out of the bar.

I sat there thinking about what I might have said, and gave it up in favor of another beer.

The trouble with regret is that it's circular. It turns inward and feeds on itself, and melancholy becomes your constant companion. I remembered my brother. Tony had had a long haul back from the brink of despair. My disappointment in love was a far cry from losing the use of your legs. It was all a matter of perspective, of keeping the proper distance. I'd thought I was over Polly, but that didn't mean she'd lost the power to wound me, or pull the wool over my eyes. I had a suspicion I'd missed the forest for the trees.

It took me the better part of the next morning to get a line on Bumpy O'Donnell. Bumpy was a sachem in the Winter Hill mob, the local Somerville crime hierarchy. There were Irish toughs over in Charlestown and Dorchester, not to mention Whitey Bulger's old bunch in Southie, and they were nobody to mess with, but the Winter Hill crews set themselves apart, insular and unyielding.

They recruited from the neighborhood juvie gangs, using the streets the same way major league ball

clubs used farm teams, except that once you were made, you were stone made. You didn't get sent back to the minors. If you broke ranks, you were dead meat. I'd heard a story about Bumpy. Instead of kneecapping a guy the old fashioned way, he tried something they did in the Provisional IRA when they didn't want to waste a bullet. Bumpy used an electric drill. In the vocabulary of Winter Hill, Black & Decker was now considered a verb.

Bumpy didn't keep office hours, but I finally ran him to earth at a chop shop on a dead-end street in the shadow of the Fellsway interchange with Route 93 and the McGrath Highway. It was the back side of the Hill overlooking the Mystic River fens and an industrial park.

I didn't know how this was going to go, and Bumpy was known not to suffer fools gladly. I introduced myself.

"I seen you around," he said, folding his arms. We were standing in the open. I put him around fifty. He was wearing a polo shirt, double-knit slacks, and tasseled loafers.

"Turk MacNamara and Leo Zachary," I said.

Bumpy had no reaction at all. He didn't so much as lift an eyebrow, and his expression gave away absolutely nothing.

"They were Winter Hill boys," I said. "That's how they got their start in the rackets."

Bumpy looked away from me and started picking his nose. He was losing interest fast.

"Leo's been fooling around with Turk's wife," I told him. "Turk was going to rat Leo out to the Feds and

let them do the heavy lifting, take Leo out of the mix. Leo got wind of it, and Turk drew the short straw. You fill in the blanks."

Bumpy sighed. "You got it wrong," he said.

"Which part?" I asked.

"Turk was a standup guy."

"Leo crossed a line with him," I said. "It was personal."

Bumpy still didn't bother to look at me. "I don't got time for this," he said wearily.

"Who's selling the Jamaicans their guns?" I asked him.

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"You've got somebody out there dealing MAC-10's, Uzis, and AK's. You put that much firepower on the streets, and pretty soon Greater Boston's going to look like South Miami. You don't need the aggravation."

"You're talking through your hat," Bumpy said.

"You'll lose your leverage, Mr. O'Donnell," I said. "People like you and the Provenzanos might as well hang up their spurs because there won't be anybody left to pick up the pieces afterwards. It'll spiral out of control."

"What do the Provenzanos have to do with it?"

"They're running scared. Old man Provenzano's doing time, his kid's a loose cannon, the capos don't know who's running the store. I think the family's up for grabs."

He smiled. "What's it to me? Might thin out the gene pool if those dirtballs started knocking each other off."

"You've got more in common with them than you're willing to admit,"

I said. "Why upset the honey wagon?"

"You got a reason for telling me all this?" he asked.

"Somebody's setting you and the other crime families up for a blood-bath," I told him.

"I heard that," Bumpy said. "I saw your lips move. What's it to you?"

"There's something to be said for the status quo," I remarked. "You need a favor, you know who to talk to. It keeps things simple. Besides, if there's a full-scale gang war, a lot of civilians are going to get caught in the crossfire."

"Why do you care?"

"I wouldn't want any of them to be me," I said.

He chuckled. "You got a lot of brass," he said. "You figure to hedge your bets, is that it?"

"I don't want you deciding I'm a nuisance and it'd be just as easy for you to take me out," I said.

"I wanted that, you'd be dead already," Bumpy said.

"You've got a leak," I told Dottie DiNapoli. The bartender's toupee was awful. Dottie seemed fascinated by the guy's rug. "Somebody inside your organization is giving away information," I went on. "You'd know better than I would where it's coming from, but your security's bad. Unless you're doing it on purpose, which would make this a whole different game."

We'd met in a saloon on Congress Street around the corner from her office. It was late in the day.

"Excuse me," I said, "but are we on the same page, here?"

"Yeah," she said distractedly, fin-

gering the heavy base of her rocks glass, a single-malt scotch straight up.

I tried again.

"Dottie, something's seriously wrong with this picture," I said. "Whatever deal you cut with Turk, it was compromised from the get-go. He got hung out to dry."

"You're telling me I was behind the curve, is that it?" She seemed oddly passive, like an accident victim or the survivor of some natural disaster, still in shock.

"Turk planned to burn a guy named Leo Zachary," I told her. "But when Leo found out what Turk had in mind, he took him out. Leo's connected, same as Turk was, or maybe even better. In fact, they were doing business together. Some little venture of their own, like, oh, black-market machine guns."

Dottie didn't look surprised. She didn't even show that much interest. It was as though I'd been describing a hypothetical case scenario, nothing to do with her at all.

"Here's the thing," I said. "Nobody on the street figures Turk for a stool pigeon, or told Leo that Turk meant to drop a dime on him. In other words, Leo got the tip from somebody else entirely. Are you with me?"

"I'm with you, Jack." Her voice was hoarse with fatigue.

"I'm guessing here, but the way I see it, the deal you offered Turk was a lot of applesauce because Leo Zachary was on the federal payroll already and he was too good a source to lose. Not that Turk was chump change, but Turk wasn't ready to give up Bumpy O'Donnell or the Provenzanos. He wanted to

compartmentalize his information. He'd stick it to Leo if he could but-ton up on the rest of it. How'm I doing so far?"

Dottie gave a weary sigh.

"I'm not saying you knew—"

"Give it a rest, Jack," she cut in. I did. "You're looking at a train wreck." She knocked back the last of her single malt. "There's an inter-departmental task force, working across jurisdictional lines. I was out of the loop, okay? Like you say, I had an understanding with Turk. Problem was, the left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing and I stepped on the wrong toes. Lucky for me it's not too late to get the toothpaste back in the tube. Otherwise I'd be filing paperwork in Dog Slobber, Arkansas."

"Turk was a fly in the ointment," I suggested.

"I never heard the name Leo Zachary until this afternoon," she said. "Leo's been burning the candle at both ends. He's in deep with the Russian mob, a Georgian gangster called Arkady Kirilenko—he's the guy running the guns, among other things, but that's small potatoes. Pocket money. Kirilenko and his people are looking to muscle out the oldtimers. Bumpy O'Donnell and his boys think they can sit it out, wait for the smoke to clear, but they're sitting on a powder keg. Meanwhile, these guys have their hands in each other's pockets, although they don't know it, because the money left a paper trail. The idea is to roll up all the major players in one ball of wax, ongoing criminal enterprise, and prosecute them under RICO."

"Leo Zachary ties them together for you."

"That's the royal you, Jack. I told you, I didn't know how it was going down."

"And what happened to Turk was damage control."

"I'm not proud of my part in this," Dottie said. "If I had it to do differently, I might think twice about it."

"You and me both," I told her.

"Speaking of damage control, Leo Zachary's gone to ground," she said. "There's a price on his head."

"He'd better come in, then," I said. "Then again, he might figure you people can't protect him."

She shrugged. "Better the devil you know," she remarked.

Which wasn't exactly the way I'd have put it but I decided it could slide. Leo was somebody else's problem.

Not, and I should have seen it coming. Leo Zachary was bound to turn up sooner or later, either under his own steam or floating face-down in the Fort Point Channel, but somehow I hadn't pictured him stepping out of the shadows when I got home that night and wedging the muzzle of a gun in my ear.

"Maybe we can square this," I said, not even convincing myself.

"I'm a dead man already," Leo growled. "I just haven't hit the pavement yet. You think you can square *that*, dipstick?"

"You're still the Feds' golden boy, Leo. They need you if they want to pull the plug on Bumpy and the Provenzanos and that bunch of Russians. They'll put you in Witness Relocation."

"They'll put me on a gurney and slip me a cyanide drip," he said. "We ain't in Kansas any more, Toto."

I took a deep breath. "I just talked to them," I said.

"Yeah, well, you talked to pretty much everybody, partner."

"It started with Polly," I reminded him.

"I wouldn't bring her up if I were you. It's bad timing."

"What's the etiquette here? I'm trying to talk you out of blowing out my ear canal."

"Jeez, excuse me all to hell, Jack. I'm new at this."

"After you wasted Turk?"

"Aw, damn it all. Kirilenko did Turk. Figured him for the weak link. I'm just looking to land on my feet."

"Well then, think it through. Without federal protection, you might as well put a gun to your own head."

He let it drop to his side. "Christ, what a mess," he muttered.

I felt lightheaded. "Come on," I said. "I'll put on some coffee and we'll sort this out."

Leo followed me inside and sat down heavily, letting the gun hang between his knees. "Everybody's got a piece of me," he said. "Like a junker Chevy being sold for parts."

"You thinking to bid up the price?"

He looked at me with a crooked smile. "It ain't a seller's market, pal," he said. "I only got the one buyer."

I started the coffee.

"You look in on Polly for me, time to time?" he asked.

"I can do that," I said.

"Turk and me, we were always on

the make, you know? But we looked out for each other. We hustled when we were kids, some of this, some of that. We were like family. There was nothing for us at home. The old man and the old lady going at it hammer and tongs, drunk, beating on each other. Home was the street." His look was inward.

"The way we came up, see, was to watch the other guy's back. I let him down."

"It happens," I said.

"Yeah, but I never meant him an injury," Leo said. "The thing with Polly, it just snuck up on us, you know? Like it was happening to somebody else. One day you're there to lean on, a sympathetic ear. Next day you're booked into a hotel room. I'm not saying we weren't both grownups, like we couldn't help ourselves. We knew what we were doing. We just pretended there was no harm in it. Nobody was going to get hurt."

"Turk must have found it pretty hard to forgive," I said.

Leo gave a sad shake of his head. "It's like the old joke, the guy's wife sleeps with his best friend so he shoots her. Why didn't you shoot *him*? somebody asks. Hey, why would I shoot my best friend? the guy answers."

"Setting you up to take the fall for the guns seems kind of over the top," I admitted.

"You take lamebrain pills this morning or what?" Leo asked. "Turk knew I was ready to roll over, and he wanted in."

"Come again?" I asked him. I wasn't sure I'd heard right.

"It was our ticket out of the life,"

Leo said. "We were trading up, simple as that. I went in the back door, Turk took the front. It was a snow job. You have to work those pencil-necks for whatever it's worth or they think they're getting something for nothing, and you can't offer somebody something for free. It don't have no value to most people. Better they think they can play you off against each other. Gives them this nice warm feeling they beat you out of the family jewels."

"They did that anyway."

He nodded. "We outsmarted ourselves," he said.

The coffee was ready and I poured us each a cup. Leo took his black. I had mine cream, no sugar.

"I'm never going to see her again, am I?" He glanced up at me, forlorn. "That's how it works. They make you vanish. New name, new place. I can't go near her. I try and contact her, it puts her in the hot seat, somebody wants to use her to get at me. I'm as dead as Turk, far as she's concerned."

"Probably no way around it," I agreed.

"Do me a favor, okay? Tell her you saw me but her name didn't come up. I wasn't worried about some gal with hurt feelings, I was only thinking how to get myself out of this jam. You understand what I'm saying?"

"You sure about this?"

"Next stop for me is the Twilight Zone, right? Kind of people looking to find me, they might figure Polly for an angle, put the squeeze on her. You gotta give her the out, Jack."

I said I would, but my heart wasn't in it.

"Let's get the ball rolling, then," Leo said. "You care to do the honors?"

I called Frank Dugan's home number.

"This better be good," Dugan said when his wife handed him the receiver. I could hear a TV in the background.

"I need you to book a John Doe," I said. I glanced at Leo. "This little piggy's going to market."

Dugan shifted gears without fuss or questions. "Parking garage at Sudbury and Congress, lower level," he said. "Twenty minutes." The police substation for Area A was right next to the garage, and the federal building was just across the street. "DiNapoli gets the collar."

"How come?"

"She needs the points."

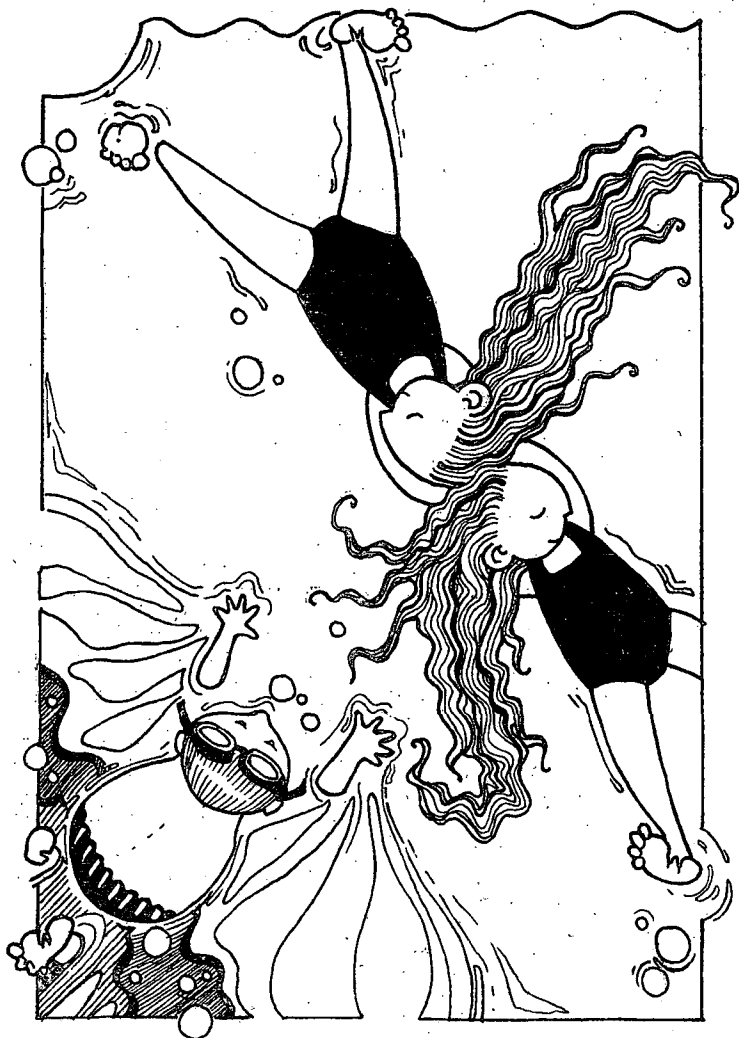
"We'll be there," I told him.

"I owe you one, Jack," he said. "I know it cost you."

Wee-wee-wee, I thought, and hung up the phone.

FICTION

ONCE THEY WERE MONARCHS



James Van Pelt

From the guard tower Müller watched Bates circulating among the children in the shallow end. Bates was a fat thirteen-year-old whose bulging fingers turned to pale prunes after a half hour in the water and whose rounded shoulders glowed dull red with perpetual sunburn. He often cruised the shallows in crocodile mode, his nose barely out, his bleached blue eyes evaluating each child before moving on.

Müller scrunched his hands into fists, thinking how good it would feel to squeeze the little pervert's neck, but he also welcomed the distraction from the lonely heights of the guard's chair. Mostly, lifeguarding left him too much time to contemplate isolation, his alienation from the screaming children, from the boring regularity of human rhythms. He thought of his unique position, high above the water's surface, looking down on all he surveyed as he had in the old days from mountaintops or from the circling giddiness of summer thermals beneath his wings. But mostly he felt the loneliness of the unending masquerade.

A handful of butterflies fluttered above the oleanders by the pump room. Müller thought about Monarchs and Viceroy's.

"Good job yesterday," said Mr. Regin as he walked by the tower. "Quick thinking!"

The old man's sandals flapped against his feet as he headed for the exit gate.

A longhaired boy wearing cut off jeans climbed from the deep end to Müller's left and dashed for the diving board.

"Don't run," growled Müller automatically, scrutinizing Bates as he drifted down to the rope that kept nonswimmers from the deeper water. The Sacramento sun's heat sank into Müller's skin like a heavy, sweltering blanket while the light glared off waves around Bates in a million stabbing points. Müller turned his hands over, releasing his fists so they took the sun in his palms. It penetrated all the way to his bones, and he could feel his strength building, his animal inside churning for release, and still he watched Bates.

Müller had warned the pool manager the day before, after he'd pulled the Seigurd boy out of the water. Everyone thought Seigurd was drowning, but after a few seconds Müller realized the child was having an asthma attack. A quick search of his towel revealed an inhaler, and twenty minutes later the kid was doing cannonballs off the high dive. "The Bates kid is a sicko, Raquelle. He's stalking the little girls all the time." His gravelly voice sounded too loud to him in the manager's office.

Raquelle hadn't looked up from the guard schedule on her desk. "Both Ray and George want the Fourth off, and Janille can't teach her Mom-Tot lessons next week. She's taking driver's ed. Can you cover?"

Müller thought about a double or triple shift on the Fourth of July, the crowded pool, nonswimmers whom he didn't know showing up for the one summer holiday; the sun like a blowtorch in the sky.

"Sure. Now, what about Bates?"

Raquelle glanced at him, zinc oxide coating her nose white. "Has anyone complained? Has he touched anyone?"

Müller looked around the room. Raquelle had a shelf full of sunscreen by the sink; he smelled a fruity layer of it on her skin. Several floppy-brimmed hats hung from a chair by the door along with a thin, light-colored blouse she wore to protect her arms outdoors, although she hardly ever guarded any more. "I've got a feeling about him."

Raquelle shook her head. "He seems like a good kid to me. Probably should lay off the sweets. Has anyone had him in a lesson or talked to his parents? Maybe they could tell you something."

"I asked. He's never signed up for one, and I don't think he has parents. He walks to the pool."

Raquelle dismissed his concern with a wave of her hand. "You're a good guard, Müller. That was a nice piece of work this morning with the Seigurd boy. I checked your records. You've been here, what, eleven years?"

Müller nodded, sighing. Raquelle was the fourth manager at the pool since he'd signed on. When someone noticed his longevity, it was time to pack his bags and go to a place they didn't know him, where they'd think he was just another late twenties guy slumming as a lifeguard and swim instructor. Maybe he'd move to San Diego and do some beach guarding.

"Keep an eye on him if you're worried. And for crying out loud, put up your umbrella. Your skin will turn to boot leather in this heat."

"I'm working on my tan," he said.

Müller squinted against the sparkle off the water. His eyes teared a little, but he stayed focused on Bates. Now the boy had sidled along the gutter until he was behind the Lindsey twins, a couple of blonde-headed, blue-eyed nine-year-olds in matching pink bikinis who were tossing a ball back and forth between them. They shrieked as the ball went up, jumping to catch it before it hit the waves. Bates submerged, staring for a long minute before coming up for air. In the glare Müller lost him. The surface caught the sun like an oily mirror, and Müller rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes to clear them. For a second, as Bates surfaced, he didn't look like a young teenager at all. For a second, as the water tumbled off his head and the fractured sunlight pierced Müller's vision, the boy's skin turned color, a streaked yellow like an old bruise, and where the flesh had been smooth before, it became lumpy as if it were covered with warts. Not little warts but fist-sized things on the edge of rupturing. For a second Bates didn't look human. He turned, as if sensing Müller's attention, and the eyes behind the goggles were bulbous. Malice filled them.

Then Müller blinked, and his pulse pounded in his throat. He nearly roared because now he knew what the creature was. The flickering reflection stopped, and Bates peeked up at him dully, a fat boy on a hot day wandering in the pool.

Something tapped Müller's foot. Beneath her hat Raquelle shaded her face with her hand.

"You looked pretty serious there for a second, buddy," she said. "Something bothering you?"

Müller scanned the few bobbing heads in the water. It was so hot that even being in the pool didn't beat the heat, and play had become listless. The pink-bikini'd girls abandoned their game of catch and floated on their backs, eyes closed, blonde hair like nimbuses around their heads, their fingers interlocked so they wouldn't lose contact with each other. They floated in perfect X's, their feet spread, their arms splayed out. Müller had watched them hold this pose for minutes at a time on other days. Best little back floaters he'd ever seen. Some kids were rolling up their towels, readying for the one o'clock break when the pool was cleared for ten minutes. On really hot days the least crowded time was between the one o'clock break and five o'clock, when parents returning from work brought their families in.

Müller said, "Do you know about the Viceroy butterfly and the Monarch?" He nodded toward the colorful display above the oleanders. "Birds find the Viceroy tasty while the Monarch is bitter, so the Viceroy has adopted the Monarch's coloring. Birds leave the Viceroy alone now."

Raquelle looked confused. "And your point is?"

"There are all kinds of examples in nature of protective coloring and mimicry, like the walking stick or the scorpion fly. Sometimes the illusion is to protect the individual; sometimes it's to make it easier to prey. There's a praying mantis in Malaysia that looks like a flower. It eats the insects that come to pollinate it. We even have myths about imitators: the wolf pretending to be Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother, for example."

Raquelle nodded. "You're thinking about the Bates kid still, aren't you?" Müller shrugged.

"You think he's a forty-year-old in a thirteen-year-old's body?"


"Something like that," said Müller. "He's a troll."

Bates had slid around to where the Lindsey twins still floated. He kept five or six feet away from them, but as the girls slowly revolved in the water, Müller could see he maneuvered himself so when he submerged he could look between one of the girls' legs.

Raquelle studied the tableau before her. "You sure you're not imagining it? I'd hate to confront a kid. Parents, you know, and libel suits. The city sent a memo on just this thing a week ago. He's not doing anything."

Bates sank so only the top of his head was visible, like a tiny hair island in a sun-beat ocean. He turned slowly, too, but when he faced the girls, he paused slightly. He looked longer, and a waggle of his fingers moved him slightly closer. "We just haven't caught him yet," said Müller. "You've got to be patient."

Raquelle clicked her fingernails against the base of the guard stand.



"Tell you what. You take a break before you turn into beef jerky, and I'll take the last fifteen minutes. I'd like to watch him for a while."

Müller swung easily out of the seat and dropped to the deck five feet below it. Raquelle mounted the ladder. "How come you know so much about bugs? Are you a student?"

Müller grimaced. "Sort of. For mimicry to work, there can't be too many mimics. The base population has to outnumber the impostor by a huge percent or the adaptation breaks down."

"I don't get you. What does that have to do with anything?"

Müller checked the pool one more time. It was almost empty now: Bates, the Lindsey twins, a handful of older kids in the diving well . . . that was it. "I was just wondering how one Viceroy butterfly would find another among all those Monarchs."

Raquelle shook her head. "You're a strange bird, Müller. Get out of the sun for a while."

In the guard room, Müller checked the job board. This late in June, most positions were filled; even the inner-city rec programs in L.A. weren't advertising. He only looked at jobs south of San Francisco. Years ago he'd been in northern Europe, and the seasons didn't bother him much. Now that he was older, though, he sought the southern sun. Even here, in Sacramento, the rainy winter that never dipped below freezing bothered him. It took a couple of weeks of ninety degree weather in May for him to shake off the winter chill.

He wrote down a few phone numbers, then slouched into a vinyl-webbed deck chair. Summer was coming on, and the heat was beginning to fill him. By late August it would be all-consuming, and the drive to find another like him would make him restless. He brushed a finger against his lip and smiled, thinking about how soft it was. Even now, after hundreds and hundreds of years of hiding in a human body, he marveled at how fragile they were. That they ever threatened him and his kind on their mountain heights amazed him. But they did, and after a century of warfare, humanity had won. Saint George and all the rest like him won.

Only protective coloration and mimicry saved the remaining few. A little magic, a lot of swallowing of pride, and a desire to survive. They spread out. They fit in. They lost touch with each other. How does a Viceroy tell another of his rare kind from the overwhelming population of Monarchs indeed? And how long would it be before a wolf in sheep's clothing would forget what it was like to be a wolf, before he might fall in love with the flock? He wanted to fly above them again, like a tremendous hawk on the hunt, waiting to drop into a long stoop, but he didn't want *them* any more; he'd been among them too long, he'd *been* one too long. Now he only wanted to soak up sun and store it, he wanted to find one of his own, and he wanted to guard them because they were weak, because they protected their young, and because he could. The little boy yesterday

with asthma—for a second, Müller had thought he might die, and the thought scared him deeply. It scared him more than any horse-mounted knight ever had.

He folded a towel to put behind his head and rested. Beyond the guard room the sounds of the summer pool went on: the steady hum of the pump and filters, the occasional slurp of water through the skimmers, a vibrating thrum of the diving board followed by the two-beat splash of someone entering the water. He smelled water steaming on the sun-washed cement, the acrid bite of chlorine, and the fresh-cut richness of grass in the park around the pool.

Being a lifeguard suited him. For hours he did nothing except store sunshine. He could sit without moving a finger; only his eyes shifted as he scanned his area of responsibility. And beneath him the human stories unfolded: there, a teen couple discovered each other while dangling their feet in the water; there, a mother struggled to watch her three boys, all under eight years old, at the same time; there an elderly woman jogged in the shallow end, practicing what she'd learned in the water-aerobics class. People were magnificent at a pool. They were physical and playful and emotional. And some of the time they too lay still and let the sun fill them.

Then, every once in a while, he stirred to action. A child slipped on the deck and needed tending. Someone in a swim lesson got over his head and needed saving. Boys were too boisterous or young lovers were too amorous or someone couldn't find a parent. And today, of course, there was a Bates, a special problem.

He drifted into a light sleep, dreaming about the undersides of clouds and a forest beneath him like a green, swaying sea.

After a while, outside, he heard crying. He sat up and pushed the door open with his foot. On the verge of grass by the baby pool one of the Lindsey twins was holding the other. "I don't know why he would do that," said the one between sobs.

The other said, "I don't know either."

Beyond them the guard chair sat empty; Raquelle stood on the edge of the diving well chatting with a couple of the kids in the water. Müller wondered how long she'd been standing there.

Without thinking Müller found himself kneeling by the girls. "What happened?" he rumbled. They stared at him, eyes red-rimmed and teary. "Nothing happened," said the crying one.


"It was nothing," said her sister, sobbing a little herself.

"I'm just sad."

"She's sad."

One turned her head toward Bates as he climbed out of the shallow end and headed for the locker room. She shivered a little and held her sister closer.

Müller couldn't move. Inside, things roiled around, raging, raging, but



he had to contain them or everything would be lost, so he couldn't move. He knelt by the girls, not speaking for several minutes until they quit crying. Bates had vanished into the locker room but hadn't come out. Raquelle called the break to clear the pool while she tested the water's chemistry, and the handful of kids who were left headed to the concession stand at the other end, away from the locker rooms.

Finally Müller stood. He was very close to the edge; in all his years he'd never been this near to letting go of the mask. In his hands he could feel the claws wanting to come out. In his jaws the long-suppressed teeth ached beneath his gums. The ancient way of rending swirled about him. He could see it, could taste it, like a warm, thick soup squeezed from animals' heads.

The locker room door closed behind him. Listening quietly, he heard Bates around the corner toweling off, humming something discordant in a flat key, the notes bouncing off the slick tile and cinder block. Müller closed his eyes and sniffed the air. Chlorine. Hand soap. Mildew. Bates—the odor of sweat and bubble gum and, beneath that, something nasty: the smell of rotted mushrooms under a bridge, what they used to call blood mushrooms, deep red and damp. It was a troll's smell. But nothing else. They were alone in the locker room. The only light came through grimy skylights that dropped foggy shafts of white into the moist air.

Müller locked the door. The click echoed. Bates quit humming.

"Is anyone there?" said Bates, his voice a little quivery after several long moments of silence. A leaky showerhead plinked water onto the cement.


Müller couldn't help it; a low growl bubbled out of him. It vibrated through the room.

Bates squeaked, then edged his way along the lockers until he stood directly in a shaft of light and could see Müller standing at the door.

"What do you want?" said Bates. He held his towel to his chest as if it were a shield, and his goggles dangled around his thick neck.

A part of Müller wanted to say something to him. After all, they were both long-lasting remnants of a time gone past, but the fury stilled the small part of him that contained his voice. The larger part of him moved away from the door and toward the fat boy. Bates stepped backwards, and suddenly his eyes narrowed.

"I know you," Bates said, and his voice dropped an octave. He stepped away again and out of the skylight illumination. For a second the illusion dropped, as it had when Müller saw him in the pool, and the creature underneath showed through. Now that Müller knew what to look for, it was easier not to be fooled. The clammy, sunburned skin covering the troll shifted, and Müller saw the heavy arms infested with ragged hair and rocklike warts. And the face beneath the face was filled with teeth—two short, heavy tusks dropped out of the corners of his mouth, pulling the lips apart so the cracked, uneven teeth in the middle poked in every direction and were revealed.



"You all are dead," said the troll. He dropped the towel and moved behind a bench, keeping it between him and Müller, who continued to advance. "You're extinct, and there aren't many of us left, either. It must be hard on you."

He didn't sound like a young boy now. Pretense was gone. The voice gurgled out of Bates's ancient throat, and his stony fingers clenched and unclenched as he kept his distance, moving toward his gym bag on the floor.

"We could share them," said Bates. "How long has it been since you've eaten well? Let me take one, one of those little girls, for example. There are two of them—they're the same—one won't be missed. I'll take her to the forest and play my game, then you could have her. We'd both be served."

Müller pushed the bench aside. He eyed the troll's arms; they were inhumanly long and heavily muscled. The troll had changed himself less to fit in. The protective coloration only affected his proportions and surface appearance; he was still mostly troll with all his subterranean powers: his stone backbone and cold earth strength. He still could be incredibly powerful. If they grappled, Müller knew the troll would win. Müller's wings were buried too deep; his hands had been hands for too long while the talons had wasted away. So little was left that wasn't memories, but still he came forward, the heat from a thousand hours of summer sun coalescing inside him.

Bates stopped at his bag, straddling it, his hands nearly brushing its handles. "The little girls are soooo tasty," he said, and in one motion plunged his rock hand into the bag, coming out with an obsidian knife a foot long.

"But you'll never know, lizard!" and he jumped forward.

Müller stood still, something quivering inside him, building. His skin could barely hold it, it felt so big, begging for release.

The troll kicked aside the last bench.


The sun stored within Müller focused, became hard, ascended.

Bates raised his knife.

Shaking with the joy of it, Müller opened his mouth as if it were the old days and unleashed the flame. It roared and roared and roared. And for a minute the locker room could just as well have been a meadow in front of a castle, and the troll a lance-wielding knight charging toward him. For a moment it was like it had always been.

And then it was done.

The sun shone like a white pupil in a blue eye and beat down. Müller stretched on the guard chair so all of his stomach caught the light. He rested his head back so his neck was warmed while he watched the pool. His hands lay palms up, gathering in heat, and within him an empty pocket began to fill again slowly, not like the old days when he'd find a



warm boulder on the shoulder of the great mountain to spread his wings, to collect the sun in leathery gulps. No, he was smaller now and these things took longer, but it still felt good. It felt very, very good to connect this way to earth and light, to the rhythms of the old Sol's might.

"The boys' locker room smells bad," said Raquelle. Müller didn't move to look down at her, but he knew her face would be hidden under her floppy-brimmed hat. "Can you check it out on your next break?" she said.

Müller breathed deeply, filling his lungs with hot summer air. Beyond the pool, wavy lines rose off the streets. He could see them swaying from black shingled roofs. "When I'm on my break. Yes."

"Probably a kid lit some trash. I don't know why anyone would play with fire on a day like today. Wouldn't surprise me a bit if it were hundred and fifteen degrees. Not even two o'clock yet. We ought to close, it's so hot. I'm pumping in city water now to cool the pool."

"It's a beautiful day. Perfect time to be on the tower," he said. In the diving well the two swimmers who remained were splashing water on the board before they got out to do their dives. Even from here Müller could see the dark splotches on the cement shrinking. A butterfly fluttered past. It looked like a Monarch, but he couldn't tell. It might have been a Viceroy. He smiled.

"Jeez, you're a strange one, Müller." Raquelle moved herself so she stood in his shadow, the smell of sunscreen strong on her skin. "You remind me of a woman I guarded with in San Bernardino last year. She's worked that pool forever, they told me, and the hotter it is, the longer she stays out. Regular sun worshipper, she is."

Müller straightened in his seat and looked down at Raquelle intently.

She continued, "There are whole weeks of weather in San Bernardino that make today seem cool. I couldn't stand it."

The first diver went off the board. The second scurried out of the pool, stepping quickly to keep his feet cool as he headed for his turn.

"You've got to like the sun if you're going to guard," said Müller. "Maybe I should look that woman up. She sounds like a kindred spirit."

The diver bounced on the end of the board twice to get extra height. At the top of his arc he grabbed his knees and bent his head back in a tremendous cannonball. Water flew everywhere, and the sun turned the spray into a flash of rainbow. For an instant sparkle, color, and the reflected diamonds of a million suns hung in the air.

"Yes," said Müller, settling back in his chair. "I might have to go to San Bernardino."

FICTION



THE TICKLER

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Arthur wondered, if the baby survived, whether she would look back on his actions of tonight and consider him a good father or a bad father. He looked forward to that day, the day when he could tell her, with her all grown up and a mother herself, "I left you that night and it broke my heart, it nearly killed me. Even though it was only for a few hours, it nearly killed me. But a job is a job, and your mama and I had to have the money, and a colored man could be fired for a lot less than missing work, even one who could squeeze joy from a piano and pass it around."

He would tell her all this and shake his head, remembering his agony with clear vision but on the other side of it and many years later. They would say together, Thank God, it was God who made that fever break about midnight and made the baby stop shaking and soaking her clothes with sweat, God who took that pneumonia out of her and left an earth angel, weak but alive and sleeping peacefully. Oh, that would be a happy day, the day he and Sophie looked back together and remembered that bleak night so long ago.

Thinking of that glorious day, he missed a bass chord and had to fake it for a couple of measures. Inez, standing over the piano and tapping her scarlet nails on the lid, frowned briefly, watching his hands as if to see whether one of them had fallen ill. When he picked up the tempo again, she smiled and nodded and went back to tapping. He smiled at her and shrugged as if it

were a simple mistake instead of a sign of his soul on fire.

When he finished the number, he allowed himself a brief pause, resting his hands on his lap. He'd done it tonight between every piece as if composing himself for the next one. In truth, he was praying to God for Sophie's life. He had no trouble coming up with the words, even in the chaos of the saloon. It was a simple matter; he was begging. Not a table of drunks a few feet away, or a line of bravado coming from a barstool with a mouth, or Inez speaking softly to him could interrupt the crystal purity of his words. Only after moving his lips in an amen did he see her smiling down at him.

"Praying to straighten those naughty boys out?" she asked and nodded at his hands.

"Don't you think I'd better?" he said, thinking of his fingers against Sophie's skin, her face cold with sweat yet burning to the touch. Even the doctor had said that; she's burning up, you've got to cool her down, so Rosetta had gone out and gotten a bucket and . . .

"Was that one of yours, Artie?" Inez asked, and he found that his face was still turned up to hers. He focused on her lips, themselves burning red with lipstick, and pasted on his phony smile.

"Sure was. What'd you think?"

"Just gorgeous," she said and smacked her hand down on the piano lid. "Another winner for sure. How about playing that one I like with the sweet right hand? You know, it starts up here," she pointed to the keyboard, "and kind of tickles its way down and back, with

the other hand crashing around down there at the other end."

Arthur's smile became genuine. "Tickles?"

"Well, you know," she said and laughed pleasantly, like treble bells being shaken. "You played it the other night and I asked you what it was, but it was a little late and—"

"You were a little drunk," Arthur finished.

"A little," she admitted, and then her lips moved some more but the words were lost under a barrage of laughter from the drunks a few feet away. Inez yelled at them to shut up, they yelled at her to bring another round, and she suggested they all go to Hell, she wasn't playing waitress any more, and if they wanted her services, they were going to pay. And more than the two bits they had slipped her for the last round.

"Inez," Arthur said when she had finished, "you think that's smart, jumping on customers like that?"

"I don't care if it's smart or not," she said, "they're not buying. Just sampling. Last round I took them, that fat one reached up under my skirt for a squeeze, and it didn't mean a thing. They'll finish their drinks and leave, and I'll be out my time when I could have been scouting around for a paying customer. They can get their own damned drinks." She finished the speech with a decisive nod and tapped on the piano lid. "Now, how about another snappy one like the one I asked for?"

Arthur wondered if he could manage it what with Sophie taking up most of his mind, but there was

always a little corner left with melodies running through it, starting, stopping, sparring with each other and then fitting together perfectly, like intertwined fingers. Ragged time. He heard it constantly in his head and put it to paper and played it for men who were too drunk to know a piano from a pisspot. Still, Inez had asked . . .

"That's old stuff," he said, although the composition was less than a month old. They were coming so fast now, he had a new one every couple of months. New and better. "This one," he said, putting his fingers gently on the keys, "is the best I've done yet."

"What'd you say?" Inez yelled because one of the drunks was calling for drinks again. Arthur waited until the shouting had stopped because he had no intention of throwing his pearls before swine and was surprised to see Inez blow a kiss in the direction of the noise.

"That little one," she said, smiling and waving toward the table. "He's a prince. I've seen him in here before, and even though he never buys, he's good for keeping those other four pigs in line. He's a gentleman, that's what he is."

"Inez, I thought you wanted to hear—"

"Oh, sure I do," she said shrilly. "Sure I do, it's just that it's getting late and I got to start doing some business. If you don't want to play another old one, then do your new one, hon. I'll be listening, I swear I will, but I better . . ." The rest was lost as she moved away from the piano and sidled up to a man on a barstool.

Arthur shrugged and bowed his head. He said another quick prayer for Sophie and then, before opening his eyes, wrenched his mind away from her. He could almost hear and feel it, a physical tearing of his spirit from the subject that was consuming it, a ragged tearing of his soul from rim to core.

Ragged time.

When he opened his eyes, he was looking down at the keyboard. He had composed the new rag during a Sunday afternoon stroll along the river with Rosetta and Sophie, Sophie wiggling in her stroller with not a mark of fever on her yet and Rosetta by his side, whispering silly things in his ear for no reason other than whimsy. He first heard the melody as she was unpacking the lemonade glasses and hummed it once through to set it in his brain before he even took a sip. Rosetta commented on it as she brought out the food, wasn't it new and wasn't it joyful, and after that he couldn't think of it as anything but the "Jubilation Rag," a piece to commemorate a day that had no flaws.

He placed his fingers on the keys, thought the opening measure, and then struck into it, his life force in his fingers. The first section was a frolic, both hands rapping out octaves that were echoed farther down the keyboard and then repeated farther down still. And then the right hand took over, playing a theme that was as sweet as Sophie's smile, asking a musical question and then answering it, and the answer led into the third section, where . . .

"Hey, piano boy."

Arthur faltered a moment, the words only skittering on the edge of his consciousness. He redirected his attention to the third section where the fingering became more complex and was near to completing it when the bellowing started up again.

"I said, we need more drinks. Thirsty as hell, aren't we, gentlemen?"

Arthur slowed and then stopped the piece, hoping for a split second that he was mistaken, that they weren't talking to him, that he could go on playing and even finish the number. He looked over to see if Inez had noticed the interruption, but the barstool she had occupied and the one next to it were empty. One man at the bar had turned, his face knotted up in a question, his lips moving in some comment, but it was lost in a sea of tavern noise.

At least someone noticed, Arthur thought, at least one. He put his fingers over the keys and got the tempo in his head again. Maybe if he pretended . . .

"Hey," the voice came again, louder, seeming to bounce off the back of his head. So they weren't going to stop.

Arthur sat for a moment, composing himself and figuring how to handle it. He was used to dealing with drunks; indeed, they sometimes left the biggest tips. He was also used to dealing with slurs; what colored man wasn't? It was the combination that was the most troublesome. As they started up the fools-talk again, he decided on the most difficult yet most effective

plan of action. He would be polite to them. It made greater fools of them and sometimes served to shut them up.

Fixing on a face was the hardest part, but Arthur affixed one of polite puzzlement and turned toward them. "Were you speaking to me?"

"Seems like we were, doesn't it? Were we speaking to him, Elliott, or were we yelling at that piano he's sitting in front of?" With each word the man came nearer to bursting the buttons on his red-checked vest. He was addressing a slender man across the table from him, the one Inez had called a prince. The Prince looked at Arthur and smiled.

"I believe we were, indeed, speaking to him, Teague. Sorry to trouble you, young man, but we need a round of drinks at this table. Hard to start a hand dry, you know. Whiskies all around and—" he nodded across the table toward Red-checks "—a double for my bulky friend. You are waiting tables as well as entertaining, are you not?"

"I am, sir," Arthur said. "And when I finish this number, I'll be more than happy to get your drinks. If you need them right now, Joseph will help you." He nodded at his counterpart, who was serving a table across the room.

"Joseph will help us," Red-checks said and looked around the table at his companions. "Joseph," he repeated, nodding and bobbing the cigar stub in his mouth as if fighting idiocy. "Trouble is, Joseph's over yonder running like a split chicken." He pushed his chair back and pointed first to Arthur and then to

his table. "And you're over here. And you both wait tables. So get our damn drinks, boy."

"That is true," Arthur said, mentally stiffening his backbone. He stiffened it ramrod straight, straight as steel, straight as a flagpole. "We both wait tables, but we do it in turns. When I'm playing, Joseph is getting drinks. Right now, I'm playing." You jackass, he added to himself and just as quickly erased it. He had to have God on his side tonight of all nights. With Sophie's life hanging by a slender thread, he could not risk offending the Almighty over a quintet of thirsty white fools.

Thirsty white men, he quickly amended.

Thirsty men, the Holy Spirit corrected, and he acknowledged the correction in his head if not his heart.

"So if you could get his attention, I'm sure he'll be over as quickly as he can. If you don't mind," he added and turned back to the piano. Mentally, he turned back to the "Jubilation Rag." Lemonade and Sophie's smile and a day that had no flaws. He nodded his head in tempo and started again. He had just lifted his hands from the low octaves in the first section when he felt the piano stool fly out from under him.

His hands came down on the keyboard with a crash as he fell, followed by his chin. Biting his tongue in the process, he squeezed his eyes shut against the stab of pain. When he opened them again, the jackass in red checks was leaning over him, his face close enough for Arthur to

smell the whisky fumes that spewed from his mouth.

"Trouble is, my boy, we do mind. Mr. Elliott said we want five whiskies, four singles and a double. Now do you understand that or not?"

For a moment there was no answer, only unimaginable pain in his tongue and Arthur was at its mercy, touching his fingers to his lips gently and then closing his fist and touching it to his mouth as well. He was only waiting for the pain to subside enough to be able to draw back his fist, only waiting to be able to think beyond the pain and harden his fist. He was eyeing the big man's frame, marking his spot, when he felt a hand under his elbow. Turning, ready to place a blow wherever it was needed to save his life, he pulled his right fist back for the punch. But the hand under his elbow was lifting him, and then another hand appeared on his left arm to steady him, and then he was face to face with the little man, the man Inez had dubbed a prince. Once the pianist was upright and settled, the Prince removed his hands. Reaching into his own coat, he pulled out a small horsehair brush and began sweeping off Arthur's coat.

"You'll have to excuse Mr. Teague, my friend," he said, and finishing the cleaning job, he examined Arthur's coat one last time, nodded, and put his brush away. "He is somewhat of a fool when intoxicated. And somewhat of a dangerous fool when he is both intoxicated and losing at cards. I trust you were not injured in any way?"

"I wasn't hurt," Arthur said and

watched as the little man bent to set the piano stool upright. Thanking God that he himself had passed the flashpoint without giving in, he hardened his fist and took a deep breath. Mentally, he slammed it into the big man's gut, knocking him backward onto the table, from which he rolled into the floor. Having done this in his mind, Arthur relaxed his fist and composed his face. "I wasn't hurt," he repeated to the little man. "Thank you for your help."

"I apologize again for my friend's bad behavior. I'd hate to think he would be the one to cause any damage to those hands of yours. You play quite well."

"Thank you, sir," Arthur said, and a tiny bit of rage moved aside for the flattery. "I appreciate that."

"Your own compositions, Mr.—"

"Arthur Scott. Yes sir, all of them are mine."

"You're wasting yourself here, friend." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small card. "I represent Langer and Jones Distillery, and that puts me in contact with all sorts of establishments, places that are more deserving of your talent than a riverfront doggery like this. I'll keep my ear to the ground for you."

"Thank you, Mr.—" Arthur squinted at the card to make out the man's name in the dim saloon lighting. "Mr. Sandford Elliott. Thank you, Mr. Elliott. I'd appreciate anything you . . ." He cut the speech off because the man had already resumed his place at the gaming table and was receiving a round of cards. Standing for an-

other moment, Arthur finally nodded in the little man's direction and then sat back down on the piano stool.

His lips moved quickly in a prayer for Sophie and then he closed his mind to trouble as best he could and placed his fingers on the piano keys.

"Arthur," he heard from the table behind him, and he knew this time there was no use pretending it wasn't directed at him. It was the Prince. "Not to bother you, but your cohort is tied up across the room and we still don't have our drinks. If you could manage, before you start back with your playing, we'd like four single whiskies and one double. I think Mr. Teague here would make it worth your while."

Arthur let his hands drop lightly on the keyboard, and the discordant tone sounded and then floated over their heads and was gone. What a simple expression of rage, he thought, simple and quick and nowhere near the volume of emotion it represented, but at least it was something. That, followed by a moment of immobility on the piano stool with his back to them, and his gestures of defiance were over. He was a man with a family and a career. He was not going to let five barflies and his own temper take either away from him.

He put on a neutral face and rose from the piano stool before turning to face them. It was one of his mind games, a simple token of self-respect, because if he rose facing them it would be as if he had agreed to their demands. Standing and then turning, he was an inter-

rupted musician instead of a musical waiter. It was a little thing and a big thing, both trivial and important.

He walked over to the table and stood over them in time to see the big man lay down a pair of kings and a pair of fours. Laughing merrily as if he had just displayed the best hand in poker history, he took the cigar stub out of his mouth and addressed Sandford Elliott.

"You've lost this time, Sandy. I know by your color that you're bluffing. Every time you do, you turn pinker than a newborn babe. No offense, of course," he said to Arthur, and they all laughed as if something funny had been said. Arthur cleared his throat.

"Whiskies all around, with one double?" he asked Elliott.

"That's right," the little man answered. "But don't go just yet, Arthur. The more witnesses I have to this, the better. All right, Mr. Teague. Prepare yourself." With that he laid down his hand. Arthur smiled to see the full house that the little man slowly revealed, laying his fingers on top of the cards and drawing them apart as if he were a magician performing a trick. "I believe you lose again, my friend. I believe that's your sixth loss in a row to either Sykes, Jennings, Thompson, or myself, and I believe you need to show some money up front. These," he held up a handful of peanuts and let them slide slowly from his open palm to the table top, "do not satisfy me any more. If you want to stay in, pay up."

"One more hand, all or nothing," the big man countered, and Arthur

turned away to get the drinks. They were still going at it when he returned.

"Ah, c'mon, Sandy," the big man was saying. "It's early." He made a great display of bringing out his pocket watch and checking the time. "It's not even ten o'clock. And we just got another round, finally." He looked up at Arthur, emphasizing the "finally" as Arthur came up beside him at the table. "Is that a double, piano boy?"

"Yes," Arthur said and lifting the drink off the tray, he imagined dousing the man with it, watching it trickle off his chin and down onto the red-checked vest and watching him sputter and cough and wipe his ruddy cheeks like a spoiled, howling toddler. The image pleased him, and Arthur smiled as he passed around the rest of the drinks.

"Will there be anything else?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes, as a matter of fact," Elliott said. "Teague, tip the man for his trouble."

Teague pressed his pudgy lips together, thought about it, and shook his head. "Everybody wanted that round, Sandy, not just me. You want to tip him, tip him. You're the one who said he was better than we deserve. I'm ready to play cards. I think it was your deal, Sykes."

"That won't be necessary," Arthur said and was turning to go when Elliott grabbed his arm.

"Yes, it is necessary," the little man said and slapped his hand down on the deck Sykes was preparing to distribute. Sliding it away from the dealer, Elliott put it under

his right elbow and leaned on it. "Now, Teague, I want you to give him a tip. He interrupted his playing, which should never be interrupted because it's first-rate, and brought us drinks that we wanted to have if we're to continue playing as you wish us to. You want to continue the game, you give him a tip."

Teague glared at the man, and it reminded Arthur of two alley cats locking eyes and circling each other before the fight. Finally Teague looked away.

He began patting his pockets, first his coat, then his vest, then out with his watch as if it might have turned into coinage, and finally a search in his pants pockets, which yielded nothing. Arthur stepped back, but Elliott still had hold of his arm and pulled him up to the table.

"You don't have a nickel on you do you, Teague?" Elliott said with the cool finesse of a snake oil salesman. "I've seen money from everyone here tonight but you."

"Of course I do, Sandy. I was checking what I've got to see if . . . when we start up again, I'll need to figure up how much . . . what my limit is. With the booze and all. I'm not tipping your protégé, Elliott. It took him too damn long to get the drinks here. Now, give Sykes the cards and let's play."

"Just as I thought," Elliott murmured, and reaching into his pants pocket, he pulled out a black purse attached to his belt by a chain. Taking out a silver dollar, he pressed it into the piano player's hand, curling his own fingers over Arthur's. "Sorry to be any trouble to you, my

friend. Now, how about giving us some more of that music you're so proficient at. And thank you for the drinks."

"You're welcome," Arthur said, turning away at once. He walked back to the piano stool, and in a reverse of his earlier ritual, he stood facing the piano, pushed the stool out with his heel, and sat on it. The little man's words echoed in his brain; he was "proficient," as though he were really fine at trimming hair or totaling a column of figures or nailing slabs of wood together for cabinets. He worked at erasing the words from his mind and failed. He worked at erasing the men from his mind and couldn't, even though with the resumption of the game they had grown deadly quiet.

At last he closed his eyes and laid his fingers gently on the keyboard, and the touch of it steadied him just enough. He said a quick prayer for Sophie, and knowing he was seated in front of a piano that his employer expected him to play, he pressed the keys down and sounded out a rag that had nothing to do with lemonade or Sophie's smile. He played the notes solemnly and sweetly, putting his heart into the bittersweet tune he'd composed on a day of melancholy before he met Rosetta, when he was alone in the world with just his talent to comfort him.

Striking the last notes of the piece, he sat in front of the piano for another moment and listened to the medley of voices behind him. Then he got up and left the saloon through the back door.

The silver dollar that Elliott had

given him lay at the bottom of the James River, cast in with the force of uncoiled rage. The effort failed to dampen his anger. Coming up from the river, he stood in the shadows behind the saloon and tried to pray but found he could not. Instead, he kicked over the garbage can next to him, then moved down and kicked over the one next to that. The second can rolled a few feet, spewing rotten food and bits of crockery, and then disappeared out of the circle of light, rolling down the hill to the river. Hearing it hit the water with a splash, Arthur bade his employer's property a speedy trip to the Atlantic Ocean. His anger, however, could not be removed so neatly.

He had wanted to avoid a physical display of rage, but it was possessing him and his emotions flowed not through his feet or his lips but his hands. He wanted to pound the rough bricks of the saloon with his closed fist until the rage was watered down enough to manage. Instead, he took off his coat, held it up against the wall, and slapped his open palm against it again and again and again, making an animal-like sound because he felt like an animal, a beast that was ruled by instinct instead of reason. He slapped the coat until his hand was hurting but not hurt and then stood in the darkness, his back propped against the saloon wall for support, his breath coming in rapid gasps. For five minutes he stood slack against the building, weak but relieved of the worst of it. He had just put his coat on and was preparing to go back inside when two men stepped out the rear door

of the saloon. Pressing himself up against the wall, he waited for them to go down to the river or next door to another bar. Instead, they stopped under the lightbulb and faced each other. In the dim light Arthur could see it was Teague and Elliott.

"You've had no money from the start," Elliott said calmly. "You've strung us along, wasted our time. You don't have a nickel to your name." He moved closer to the big man, his right hand disappearing under his coat.

"It's not like that, Sandy," Teague said, his breath coming sparse and lightly. Even from ten feet away, Arthur could smell the man's sweat, not regular work-earned sweat but sweat smelling of raw fear. Teague was shaking his head at the little man, smiling half-heartedly and gesturing widely with his hands. "I've got enough money to buy and sell this place and everybody in it, including you." He jerked his thumb backward toward the bar and worked at a laugh.

"Show me."

"Well, I don't carry it around with me. It's back at my place. In the safe. You know, some of these whores are pickpockets as well. You'd be wise to leave your money at home, too."

"How did you plan to cover your losses?" Elliott asked and moved closer still. "And your tab? Just hoping we'd pick up your tab for you? Just hoping we'd forget about your losses?"

"Of course not," Teague said, trying to effect a scoff, but the words cracked apart and faded. He cleared

his throat. "I was going to give you and anybody else I owed money to an I.O.U."

"And your tab?"

"That, too. Well, actually," he chuckled, a pair of strained tee-hees, "I was counting on winning, at least once. Who's ever seen a worse run of luck than I had tonight?"

"I've seen worse luck," Elliott said. "I've never seen worse character. Do you take me for a sucker, Teague?"

"Of course not. I just thought a signed I.O.U. would be as good as money between gentlemen." Having failed at the scoff, Teague turned huffy. "I didn't know anybody would make such a fuss over things, that's all. Money is money, no matter when you get it."

"You're right, Teague," Elliott said. "Money is money. Talk is not money. A piece of paper with your signature on it is not money. But that watch of yours might be. Take it out and let me look at it."

"No," Teague said, and for the first time Arthur detected a hint of backbone in his voice. "That's not negotiable. My granddaddy gave me that watch, and it'll go to my eldest son if I ever have one."

"I'm not negotiating with you, you fool. I'm willing to take the watch if I like the look of it and forget about what you owe me. You can settle up your tab with the saloon any way you like. Now let me see it."

"That watch has been in my family for five generations, Elliott. You're not getting it, and that's final." He turned sideways to the

door of the saloon and cocked his head toward it. "Now, let's go back in, and I'll write you a note for what I owe. And then maybe we'll have another round. On somebody else." He chuckled and, Arthur suspected, winked. "First, though," Teague said, working at the buttons on his pants while turning toward the wall, "before I take any more in, I better . . ." The rest of his words were lost in a shout that turned into a few garbled curses followed by a groan. The little man had lunged at him with the speed of a serpent, his right elbow moving backward and then jabbing savagely into the big man's gut. When Teague failed to fall at once, Elliott lunged again and then again until the big man, still clutching his belly, fell forward in a heap, his forehead hitting the dirt with a dull thud.

Taking out his handkerchief, Elliott wiped and inspected the blade of his knife and then replaced it under his coat. With one foot he lifted the man on the ground until he was able to reach into the pocket of his vest and take out his watch. With a quick jerk he freed the watch from Teague's body and put it into his own pocket. Taking off his coat, he brushed at the sleeves and then laid it over a barrel that stood beside the door to the saloon.

Arthur had been holding his breath, and now, suddenly, he was suffocating. He exhaled quickly and then drew in a breath through his mouth. Gradually sound returned to his ears, laughter and voices from inside the bar, a ship's horn sounding in the distance, the sound of glass breaking from a grog shop

farther down the row of riverfront saloons.

The sound of a piano not being played.

Surely someone would come out looking for him soon, Joseph or the man who had hired them both or maybe just a customer wanting fresh air. Arthur prayed the little man wouldn't notice the spilt garbage cans and come over, probing into the darkness that was concealing him. He could do nothing but pray and hold himself flat and still against the wall of the bar and try to keep his breath from coming in ragged gasps. And wait for Elliott to finish his business.

The little man worked swiftly and surely at concealing his deed. Using his foot again, he turned Teague over onto his back. With the delicacy of an artist, he bent and buttoned the man's coat over the bloodied vest, then carefully wiped his own fingertips on the handkerchief. Turning his back to his victim, Elliott stood between the dead man's legs, and lifting a foot in each hand, he dragged the body out of the circle of light and down the hill toward the river.

Now, Arthur's brain screamed at him, go back into the bar and sit at the piano and play, play something old and dear so you won't miss every note and so the shaking of your hands will be overcome by familiarity.

Now, now, now, his common sense told him, because it wouldn't take the little man long to heave Teague into the river. Just one quick pull and swing and the body would be gone, maybe with a push to get it to

deeper water, but Elliott wouldn't want to get wet or dirty so the dead man would have to sink or float away on his own.

Arthur took a deep breath and inched along the wall toward the door, watching down the hill for any sign of movement and trying to ignore another voice in his head that was making war with his common sense. He had witnessed a murder, this intruder insisted, and something must be done. He must go back into the bar at once and tell someone, though then he would be dragged into it himself, into an affair between white men that would be resolved in a court of white men, leaving him marked and ruined.

Walk back into the bar, said common sense, think about Rosetta and Sophie, think about your career, think about the children not yet born to you, the compositions you have not yet penned. You were only down the back alley talking to someone, you were down on the riverbank getting some fresh air, you did not see anything, you did not hear anything. Go back into the saloon and live the life you would have lived if you had never come out that door.

Your brother's blood is crying out, said the intruder voice, you saw it happen, you can't just walk back into the bar and pretend that you didn't because you'd have your life all right but what sort of life would it be? How could you raise Sophie to be good, how could you pour your soul into another composition, knowing that that same soul was stained with another man's blood?

Arthur moved to the edge of the

darkness and stood listening. What seemed like half an hour was probably no more than five minutes, and soon Elliott would be coming back up the hill to reclaim his coat and return to his seat at the gaming table. Or possibly he would just leave and the crime would go unpunished, like a multitude of crimes throughout history, just one more act of evil unanswered.

The dead man was a bastard, common sense retorted, think of his insults to you, think of all the insults you've ever received or heard about, and then go back in and sit at the piano and play and forget it.

A bastard, yes, but a brother still, the intruder insisted, or is your belief really only skin deep, as shallow as the river and flowing only one way as well, the way that is neat and clean and easy?

Arthur heard a splash, not the sound of a boy throwing a stone or a fish being tossed away but the bulk of a body being slung into the dark water of the James.

Elliott had disposed of his trouble. Now he'd have to clean up even if he didn't go back into the bar because a man couldn't walk down the street with blood on his hands, and he had surely gotten blood on his hands if nowhere else.

Your brother's blood, the intruder voice started again, and Arthur tried hard to ignore it because time was running out and he had to either do something or do nothing. To be caught in between, to be caught standing in the alley pondering, would be to invite his own death.

Your brother's blood, your brother's blood, the voice yelled, and Ar-

thur looked down the hill for Elliott and didn't see him. Do something or do nothing, the war in his head raged on, until finally, in defiance of every evil that had ever been committed, in reply to every injustice that had ever gone unanswered, but mainly because he needed God on his side tonight, he decided to do something.

Quickly, and still hidden in the shadows, he looked over the scene of the killing. The big man had fallen onto the dirt. His blood would not be apparent to a casual observer and would probably not be tracked in by anyone's shoes, at least not enough to notice. Elliott had been careful not to dirty himself and was no doubt cleaning his knifeblade and hands in the river right now. He would be free of blood, having been careful to remove his coat before cleaning up . . .

Moving as if coming out of a trance, Arthur ran out of the shadows and grabbed Elliott's coat from the barrel where he had so carefully laid it after the killing. He shifted the coat in his hands until he was certain that he had the front of it, then pressed it into the earth where the big man had fallen, pushing and rubbing and pounding it until it could not help but soak up some of what was there. Lifting the garment, he looked at the mess of dirt on the front and then remembered the little brush Elliott had used earlier. Fumbling in the coat pockets, he found the brush and swiped at the dirt on the front until the black fabric appeared to be clean. Pressing one finger to his

tongue, he pushed it into the cloth of the coat and, after a quick glance down the hill, held it up to the light-bulb. Seeing the faint trace of blood he had hoped for, he laid the coat neatly over the barrel just as Elliott had left it and went back into the saloon.

The trick now was to act normal. Before settling on the piano stool, he glanced over the patrons in the bar to see if anyone had noticed his reappearance. No one looked his way except Joseph who, loading drinks onto a tray at the bar, threw his head back and pointed to the piano. Arthur nodded and held up two fingers. After noting that Elliott's tablemates were still waiting to continue their game, he sat down on the stool and composed his mind and his fingers.

His next to last number of the evening, for he would surely have to leave the place if he carried out his plan, was one of his first compositions, penned when he was only fourteen. He whispered a prayer for Sophie and one for himself and sounded the soft echoes, treble and bass, that began the "Azalea Rag," a juvenile tribute to his grandmother's favorite flower. He could play the piece blindfolded, backwards, or upside-down, or even after witnessing a murder, and the familiar notes soothed his nerves and transformed his thinking from a frantic, endless circle to a logical straight line. As his fingers automatically found the keys, he rehearsed the plan in his mind and could find no fault with it. Perhaps someday he could even work again

in Richmond when the thing had become old news.

He finished the "Azalea Rag" and sat quietly on the piano stool, listening to the voices behind him. Sometime during the number Elliott had come back in and resumed his seat at the table, and Arthur could hear the soft, distracted responses that went around as each man bet his hand in the poker game. Whatever reference Elliott had made to the big man was not being questioned and his cleanup job must have been sufficient. For now, Arthur thought, and prepared to play his last number of the evening and perhaps in the city of Richmond for a long time.

He offered up his most heartfelt prayer of the night and then broke into the "Jubilation Rag" because he was determined to play it through in public at least once. It would also be the keynote of his new life, wherever that was to be, a life with a robust Sophie and Rosetta by his side and more compositions than there was paper to put them on. As the piece swelled in volume near the end, he felt the joy of it from his fingers to his toes and, knowing the feeling would not last, savored it while he could and finished the number feeling invincible. Then he turned on the piano stool and stood up. He was a waiter, and it was time to go to work.

Joseph, who had been standing by during the last few measures of the piece, promptly took his place on the stool.

"Nice," he said, nodding to Arthur and then running his fingers up and down the keyboard in lim-

bering scales. "Good luck getting tips from that table of bummers next to the bar. They've been broke for the last hour, nursing three grogs and . . ." The rest was lost as he began playing, closing his eyes and caressing the keyboard like a lover. In a quarter hour, after he had warmed up, the lover would turn into a playmate, though Arthur would miss the transformation. In a quarter hour he would be gone.

He had to move quickly. The murderer and his cohorts had been at cards for two or three hours. Another hour and none of them would be sober enough to stand. Responding to a pair of snapping fingers across the room, Arthur checked Elliott's table as he went by. Good. Their drinks had not been replenished since the last round he had brought them. Three empties, one low. He only hoped the poker game was not near its conclusion as well, since only the winner would be likely to stay around for one last grog. He needed the table full of men so maybe at least one would not be too drunk to put two and two together.

After serving the snapping fingers, he walked back over to Elliott's table and stood, a wonderfully pleasant expression on his face, waiting for the betting to finish going around. After receiving his next card and opening, Elliott turned to face him.

"Have you ever played razz, Arthur?"

"No, sir," Arthur, the Wonderfully Pleasant Waiter, replied. "I don't know it. Like another round, Mr.

Elliott? You're getting awfully low there." Say yes, Arthur willed, say yes, say yes.

"We are indeed," Elliott said. "But we're about ready to call it a night and settle the hash. We've already lost one fellow as I'm sure you've noticed, since he bedeviled you much of the evening. Sorry about that, my friend. He is rather a bad character, I'm afraid, and sneaked out owing us all money. And if I know that sort, we'll not be likely to see him again."

"That's a shame," Arthur said, willing them parched throats. "Still, how about a drink for the road?"

"What say, fellows?" Elliott said. Two of them made noncommittal grunts, the other shook his head no. Seeing the man sway in his chair with the gesture, Arthur had little hope of his powers of observation. Elliott turned back to the waiter and shook his own head. "Thank you, but I think we're done for the night. If it's another tip you're after—"

"No, sir," Arthur said quickly, as the man reached for his purse. "It's not that, it's just that I feel bad about the unpleasantness earlier, and I'd like to bring you another round. On the house," he added in desperation, and the ploy worked. The noncommittals brightened up a bit, as if they'd had smelling salts thrust under their nostrils, and even the third man, now gripping the tabletop for support, managed an unstable nod.

"You're a fine fellow, Arthur." Elliott patted his arm and smiled. "But you don't have to do that." He pulled the change purse out and

took out a fistful of coins. "This will cover my tab and Teague's and one more round for these poor chaps here. You keep the rest. I'd like to know I advanced a career such as the one you've got ahead of you. As for the drinks, I'll have a Virginia fancy if they can manage it here."

"Of course," Arthur said, doubting they could but knowing it didn't matter. He took the coins and looked at the other three men. "Gentlemen?"

"How about three gin and waters?" Elliott said, looking back at his card hand. "And more water than gin, please, since we have to settle up soon and take our leave. And we don't want any more unpleasantness, do we, Sykes?"

Sykes looked up from his hand without comment, and Arthur imagined Elliott must be into him for quite a sum. At least he hoped so, since such a man would be eager for his opponent's downfall.

"Three gin and waters and a Virginia fancy coming up," he said. "And how about four coffee chasers to follow? Get some of the chill off this October night?"

"Good idea, Arthur," Elliott said. "But make it three. I'm not feeling chilled and I don't need reviving like those poor sods."

"Yes, sir," Arthur said and left the table for the bar, willing all the men to stay put until he returned. "Three coffees, pronto," he said to Owen behind the bar. "And after that, three gin and waters, mostly water, and a Virginia fancy. And a clean rag."

"What the devil is a Virginia fan-

cy?" Owen said, setting coffee cups on the bar.

"Make that a brandy sour," Arthur said, loading each coffee as it was filled. "And give me that cloth in your pants."

Owen passed him the rag, and Arthur handed over the money Elliott had given him. "For their tabs," he said, and lifting the tray with coffee, he made haste back to Elliott's table.

"I brought these first," he explained, "so they could cool off a bit while you're enjoying your drinks. Come to think of it, though," he added as if he'd just had a brainstorm, "you'd better have a taste of it now and see if it's decent. Last time I tried Owen's coffee, it tasted like that river out there."

Arthur imagined Elliott cut him a look, but he couldn't be sure and he didn't dare turn. Instead, he concentrated on the faces of his three coffee tasters.

"It's decent," Sykes said after a sip, and Arthur dared to hope the man wasn't as drunk as he had feared. His speech was not slurred, and the coffee cup he was bringing to his lips did not rattle or spill in its saucer when he set it down. "Let's finish this, Elliott," he said, studying his hand and then folding it up like a stored accordion. "You're dealing. Down and dirty time."

The final deal went around, and after their bets were placed, Elliott spoke to Arthur. "The game of razz, Arthur, is basically seven card stud with one major difference. I assume you know that in the latter the best hand wins. In razz the opposite is true. The worst hand wins. I had

thought to give these gentlemen a break by playing a game that would reward their apparent lack of skill. But alas," he said, spreading his cards on the table, "I doubt they can win even at this. Beat that, gentlemen."

The others displayed their hands, and Elliott burst into laughter. Fearing the other three men would leave in disgust, Arthur made soothing noises about a last round and nearly ran to the bar. Seeing his order ready and waiting, he blessed Owen mightily and traded his empty tray for the loaded one.

Going back to the table, he was relieved to find all four still there, the losers no doubt tolerating Elliott's arrogance in order to get one last, free drink. Elliott was figuring something on a scrap of paper.

"Ah," he said, seeing Arthur beside him with the tray of drinks. "You've got a drink for me, and I've got a bit of advice for you, Arthur. Do you play cards?"

"Yes, sir," Arthur said, waiting, waiting while the other three had a few more sips of the sobering coffee. While pretending to listen to Elliott, he studied the man's coat, trying to gauge exactly where he'd rubbed it into the dirt. A lightened area where the brush hadn't swept all the dirt away was faintly visible under the right lapel. He would aim for that; mentally, he marked it while Elliott was jabbering away.

"If you play poker, Arthur, there are two things you need to remember. The first is, know your opponents, at least know something of them. Know their weaknesses, such as—" he smiled in Sykes' di-

rejection—"an inability to bluff. It worked once, he thought it would work the rest of the night. It didn't." Elliott waved the sheet of figures in the air. "The second thing, if you ignore the first, is ask to see some money up front before the first hand is dealt. Otherwise you'll get stuck losing out to a weasel like Teague, who would rather disappear from the face of the earth than pony up what he owes. You remember those two things, and you'll come out on top every time. Or at least not owing the farm like poor old Sykes over there. I'll take that drink now, son."

"Yes, sir," Arthur said and eyed the dirty patch on Elliott's coat one last time. Concentrating on it, he lifted the brandy from the tray and half dropped, half threw it onto the dusty spot under the lapel. Elliott jumped up like he'd been stung.

"Judas Priest," he shouted and shook liquid from his hands, cutting Arthur to ribbons with his eyes. Then, evidently remembering he was a mentor, his face became placid, his voice forgiving.

"That's all right, my boy," he said, rubbing some liquid off his chin with the back of his wrist. "These things happen, don't they? If you could just get me a cloth..."

"Of course, sir," Arthur said and set his tray down on the table. He pulled the bar cloth out of his pants pocket. "I am so sorry, Mr. Elliott, it just slipped. Here," he said and first wiped the seat of Elliott's chair, then the tabletop in front of him, getting the cloth good and damp. "Please sit down." He pulled the

chair out, and Elliott sat, still wiping his face with his hands. "I'll get you another one, on the house, of course. But first—" Arthur said, and after one last prayer for justice, for his career, but most of all for Sophie, he folded the cloth into a neat square—"let me work on your coat a bit and get the worst out." Before Elliott could respond, he put one hand under the lapel and pushed the damp cloth onto the spot he'd pressed to the ground earlier. He pressed it and pressed it, working it well into the wet spot and then, hoping the other three men and God were watching, he pulled it away and with a puzzled frown examined it.

"You weren't cut, were you, Mr. Elliott?" he said, looking at the bright red stain on the formerly white cloth. "Because this sure looks a lot like blood. Maybe when you and Mr. Teague were talking out back, maybe when you pulled your knife out, you cut yourself. Better check your hands, sir, because this looks fresh, like blood that's been shed in the last hour or so. You know," he said, setting two more drinks down, gin and waters for his astonished witnesses, "a cut can turn septic awfully fast. Good night, gentlemen." He put the last drink and the bloody cloth on the table in front of Sykes.

"Elliott, what the devil—" he heard Sykes say, but it was no longer any of Arthur's affair. He returned the tray to the bar, thanked Owen for his help, and left for home, his mind consumed with new though fragile hope for Sophie's life.

FICTION

THE GOOD DAUGHTER



Mike Wiecek

His client would have been unmistakable even had the coffeeshop not been deserted. Dressed in damp, work-worn twill, the man was staring unfocused at the wall. His rough and callused hands held a porcelain cup gently and with some unfamiliarity. He was old but sat straight in the tiny chair, strength from a lifetime of labor obvious in his frame.

"Yasui-san, is it?" said Sakonju, sitting across the narrow table.

"Oh yes . . . that's right." The man's reverie broke. "Thank you. I appreciate your coming here."

Sakonju nodded and, oddly, they lapsed into silence. Outside sleet gusted against the windows, half-shuttered against the storm, and the constant growl of Tokyo traffic was muted. Midafternoon, it felt like night.

"She's dead, you know," said the man eventually. He set the cup down carefully and clasped his hands, arm muscles suddenly taut, his face bowed. "I didn't think it would get worse than that. Two weeks ago and I thought I had died, too. When your child . . . is gone, so are you, really."

The proprietress had disappeared into the back. Sakonju was a longtime regular, and he often conducted business here; like many of the city's self-employed, especially those in the discreet professions, he had no office of his own. Most people preferred the anonymity of some nondescript teahouse to a door with INVESTIGATIONS in big characters.

"How did she die?" asked Sakonju, into the man's sorrows.

"Badly." Yasui pushed slowly at his gray buzz cut, an obviously unconscious habit. "She fell from our balcony. An accident, I thought, of course. But then the police said she jumped. And it's true, you couldn't just fall off, there's a concrete wall higher than her waist. Higher than *my* waist. But why? That's what I couldn't understand. She was so beautiful, so smart, everything she could imagine in her future."

He pulled out a battered leather notebook, worn from years in the same workshirt pockets, and extracted a photo, handed it across. Sakonju saw a young, strikingly pretty girl in a high school uniform, laughing. She was holding a small cat who was turning to climb up her shoulder.

"No reason, no explanation at all," said Yasui. But after a moment even greater pain shadowed across his face. "None, that is, until I found this. And then I called you."

With the same careful, almost delicate movements he took from the notebook a curled scrap of paper, pink, a few centimeters wide, obviously a sticker that had been scraped from its surface and mostly torn in the process. He flattened it on the table between them, and Sakonju saw the girl's face again.

"VIRGIN LUST," ran characters across the top. "Schoolgirls want to play with you!" Only half the picture remained, but it showed her topless, with a sultry pout and one hand provocatively below her waist.

Yasui's eyes had closed.

"From a phone booth, right?" said Sakonju.

"Of course." His hand covered the

picture. "They're pasted in so thick you can hardly see out sometimes. I found it in Shibuya, where I was changing trains a few nights ago. I had just stopped in to call my wife, to see if she still needed me to stop for dinner on the way home—" He stopped abruptly. After a moment: "I want you to find them."

Sakonju considered the wracked face and didn't bother asking who.

"What do the police say?"

"That it's not her. The detective was not helpful. He didn't seem to care."

"Perhaps he's right." But Sakonju could not deny the resemblance. "Anyway, what if I do find them?"

Yasui stared off at the wall, and Sakonju watched as his entire torso flexed and went rigid, veins over the ancient, massive arms standing out. "You will locate them, and tell me, and I shall see them." He was hardly breathing.

Sakonju decided to say no; free-lance vengeance was pointless. But Yasui's eyes came into focus again. "And then we shall go together to the police," he continued quietly, "and they will describe how they ruined her life, removed all her choices but the final one."

He remained stiff, then relaxed slightly. His hand pushed back his buzz cut again. "Okay?"

"Thirty thousand yen per day," said Sakonju. "Half-day increments."

He walked from the crowded south concourse at Shibuya Station into a stinging rain. What snow and sleet had fallen earlier in the day was now grimy slush,

splashed up by the constant, crawling mass of avenue traffic. Even the riot of gaudy neon lighting the entertainment district, the huge TV screens mounted ten stories up, and the amplified, echoing music did little to ease the gloom of a January afternoon.

The adhesive sticker, cheaply made, had torn and disintegrated when Yasui scraped it off, and its phone number was unreadable. Still, Sakonju had decided to start here rather than head directly for Higashi-Natoro, where Yasui lived.

He found another of the tags after only ten minutes, in the third bank of pay phones. It was mostly covered over by others more recently applied, but the girl's face was immediately recognizable. At a hole-in-the-wall pharmacy Sakonju had earlier purchased a small bottle of nail polish remover; by brushing the acetone liberally over the pasted stickers, he was able to dissolve the adhesive and pull the advertisement free. Soaked by the solvent it was almost transparent. He stepped from the booth to escape the fumes.

Down back streets from the station small, discreetly signed hotels lined the alleys. Ducking out of the slanting rain, Sakonju followed a dogleg into one cramped entry and paid for two hours, passing his money through a slot in an opaque frame. Despite its appearance of anonymity, privacy, he quickly spotted the security camera hidden in one corner. He ignored it and took the key as it was pushed from the slot by unseen hands.

The room was basic. Its only con-



cession to purpose, besides an unusually large western bed, was a waist-high window set in the interior wall, looking into the bathroom and over the tub. Stains were visible here and there despite the single lamp's low wattage. The telephone on the table required coins.

He dropped in thirty yen and dialed the number that had appeared on the now-dry sticker.

"Pleasant Services," said a brusque middle-aged woman.

"A girl," said Sakonju in a voice more rough than usual. "Young. High school, eh?" They discussed prices, and Sakonju gave her the name of the hotel.

"Forty minutes," she said and hung up. Sakonju glanced at the TV—a hundred yen was required for its operation. He sighed and leaned back on the bed instead, closing his eyes.

The girl showed up over an hour later. She was dressed in a sailor-suit uniform and carried a large pastel Hello Kitty shoulderbag, but Sakonju, who'd spent too much of his professional life among the sad members of the water trade, pegged her at twenty or so. He locked the door, and she sat on the bed, loosening the uniform's scarf.

They looked at each other, and Sakonju took ten thousand yen from his wallet, laying it on the end-table before sitting on the chair some distance away.

The girl frowned. "It's twenty," she said.

"All I want to do is talk."

"It's still twenty."

Sakonju, who still held his wallet, removed the photo and handed it

over. She took it unwillingly. "My daughter," he said. "Pretty, isn't she?"

"So?"

He showed her the sticker. "I haven't seen her for three months. Then a buddy, a guy I work with, he found this. I guess she's a co-worker of yours, huh?"

The girl appraised him. "You're not married," she said.

"No." Sakonju examined his ringless hand. "No. She left me, long ago."

"I've never seen her. It's not like we go into the office every day, you know?"

"Yes," said Sakonju. "I do know."

He ran the line a while longer. He looked away briefly, and the ten thousand yen note disappeared.

"There's nothing I can do for you, looks like." The girl adjusted her clothing and stood.

"They'll know. The guys in charge. Who are they?"

She paused. "Like they'd tell you anything?" A quick, derisive laugh.

Sakonju replaced the two pictures in his wallet. "They'll talk to me," he said quietly.

After a moment, the girl nodded her head. "Yeah, maybe they would," she said in a different tone. "Not afraid of much, are you?"

"Neither are you." Sakonju remained sitting but looked up at her. "It would have been different for Mitsuko."

She let her shoulderbag slump to the bed again but stayed on her feet. "I really don't know. Her or them. I meet a guy in a bar twice a week, give him the money. They call me on the beeper otherwise."

She flicked the bag's strap without looking away from his face.

Sakonju pressed for another minute, but she was adamant and he decided she was telling the truth.

"I fear . . . I'm afraid it may be too late for Mitsuko," he said and paused. "But you could still get out. You still have a chance."

She laughed again, the abrupt, scornful cough. "No, it was too late for me before I even started."

"Why?"

She turned on him angrily. "Why? What else could I do?"

"Anything. Whatever . . ."

Her contemptuous grimace stopped him. "Oh, right, whatever I wanted!"

He said nothing.

"Little town in Tohoku, no one but old folks like mine dying just a little faster than their farms? I didn't have the grades, barely made it out of middle school, and you can't live in the city on part-time jerk jobs. Don't talk to me about *futures*."

She tore open the door and left it hanging. Sakonju closed it gently behind him when he followed a few minutes later.

Higashi-Natoro was no different from any of a thousand other local stops in the vast Kanto exurbia: a small shopping street outside the station, a lot filled with dilapidated clunker bicycles, three and four story concrete buildings crowding away in all directions. He stopped at the police box, and the thickset patrolman, rather old for his rank, gave him polite directions to the apartment block.

It was a twenty minute walk past

small bars, warehouses, and one-man machine shops scattered amid the stained residential buildings. The rain had stopped during the long train ride out, but the damp night wind pierced his jacket.

Beside a small park with some battered playground equipment and no vegetation whatsoever, Sakonju arrived at his destination and paused to consider its setting.

It rose higher than the surrounding buildings, at least ten stories, holding easily two hundred units. Even now, well after dark, some clothes were still hung on the laundry lines stretched on every balcony, perhaps to dry the next day. Many windows were lit, most with the blue of a TV's screen or a cheap fluorescent glare. He saw no police tape, but of course the fall had occurred two weeks earlier.

Inside he waited almost two minutes for the elevator but it never came though the button remained lit, so he trudged up eight flights and down the long hallways until he found the Yasuis' door.

The woman was thin, almost gaunt, and wore her grief no more easily than her badly permed hair. Past her Sakonju could see that the apartment was spotless—almost barren.

"He hasn't come back yet," she said. "I know I told you it wouldn't be much longer when you called, but these days . . . often he is late."

"Perhaps I could wait a moment?"

She paused, nodded, and let him in, somewhat to Sakonju's surprise. It was an unusually forward request, for people rarely entertained



in their cramped and cluttered rooms. Particularly an unknown male and a woman home alone, but Yasui's wife didn't seem to care, closing the door without a glance at the hallway.

He slipped his shoes and, following her wordless, gestured invitation, sat on the tatami. An alcove housed the kitchen to his right: a brief counter, two burners, steel sink, and a half-high refrigerator. The metal surfaces gleamed with obsessive polish. Behind him a dark uncurtained window led no doubt to the balcony. The other wall was mostly a sliding door, now half shut, and beyond it he could see the apartment's only other room.

"Masakazu Sakonju," he said, proffering a card.

She took it, studied the content blankly, and then set it on the low kotatsu table between them. "He said he was going to hire you, but I don't know why," she said. "I didn't want him to. What purpose can it serve? Mitsuko was a fine girl, a wonderful girl, a gift to the world."

"I'm sorry."

Through the sliding door Sakonju could see a reliquary cabinet, doors open, with photographs, wilted flowers, and votive candles melted to stubs. He imagined the Yasui kneeling before it, hands pressed in hopeless prayer.

"She was brilliant, you know. She would have been going to college next year—Tokyo University, I'm sure. Such a mind! She studied all the time."

"When did you see her last?"

"Only . . . only an hour before. I was here, right in the same place!

—but I'd shut myself in to take my afternoon nap. She was studying. Reading her schoolbooks . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Sakonju looked for tears but found none.

"How could she leave me like that? One room away, she must have been so quiet not to wake me."

"Was there no explanation?"

"Nothing. No note, nothing said. I cannot understand. I do not understand at all."

Sakonju fell to stock sympathies though she didn't seem to hear.

"Who were her friends?"

"Oh, she had so many friends! How could she not, so beautiful, so smart?"

"I guess she spent a lot of time with them."

"No, of course not. She had to study."

"Do you know their names?"

But he received no names.

"May I look at her books?"

She reached to slide the door all the way open. "In there. I'm sorry—I will stay out here."

The second room was crowded with shelves, narrow cabinets, and a futon rolled along one wall. With no furniture Sakonju could have lain in its middle and reached all four walls with his hands and feet. A small TV was unplugged next to the reliquary, and he decided it had formerly rested atop the cabinet.

One corner was obviously Mitsuko's, though the items were far too neat for a teenager's habits: pastel clothes hung in a small open wardrobe, and a few small toys and stuffed animals were arranged at its base. Pictures of pop stars and a particular sumo wrestler were

tacked to the cheap wood. He poked around, careful to return everything he touched to its precisely chosen place, but found nothing of interest. Two pocketbooks held half-used cosmetics. A tennis racquet, barely used, was zipped in a padded cover with an appliquéd cartoon of a popular TV cat. Some comics—the teenage girl kind, with thin handsome boys and large-eyed heroines—were stacked alongside the wardrobe. He imagined her reading them at night, the low noises of her parents just beyond the thin paper door, dim light from the old chipped enamel lamp.

Finally, beneath a bulky folded sweater, he discovered a couple of school notebooks. They were half filled with casually taken notes. Sakonju studied the rather immature characters accompanied by doodles and little hearts and decided they were from her English, geography, and national history classes. More usefully, there were some notes to Fumie and Etsuko, brief asides about this boy or that teacher she'd clearly written to pass around surreptitiously during the lesson. He considered the notebooks for a time, then placed them back under the sweater and returned to the other room.

"Why don't you just leave us alone?" She still wasn't crying, but her voice was at breaking point and her hands clenched tightly; much like her husband's in the coffeeshop as Sakonju remembered later. "We don't need you picking over our loss. Tell him anything and leave us be!"

"I'm sorry," he said again and embarked upon the elaborate ritual

of leave-taking though the courtesy was lost on her.

"She was so smart," Yasui said as Sakonju stepped back into his shoes, but she didn't rise to bow him out. "A scholar, I can say. There is no reason; just no reason at all."

He was back in Higashi-Natoro the next day, walking out of the station into a raw gray morning, pulling his jacket collar closed. A few salarymen in blue suits and sad wrinkled raincoats hurried past him, late for the morning train.

As he'd expected, the same patrolman was on duty in the koban; out here they probably worked alternate twelves, one or two at post all the time. An old police bicycle, its white box carrier and nightstick holder dented, leaned against the outside wall. Inside the little room the patrolman was carefully adjusting the kerosene heater, which had been partly disassembled. He glanced up as Sakonju slid open the glass and plastic door, made a polite acknowledgment, but turned back to finish his careful tinkering.

"Sorry," he said, turning the heater back on and nodding in satisfaction as the small blue flame reappeared. It was barely warmer inside the koban than out. He was older than Sakonju had estimated last night, perhaps forty-five, but his sharp eyes had placed him immediately. "What can we do for you today?"

Sakonju introduced himself. The policeman considered his card briefly.

"Who hired you, then? The father, I assume."

Sakonju was briefly taken aback by the man's quick perception. But of course he remembered Sakonju's destination the night before, and he no doubt knew all the details of the suicide, including the family's members. Not that he would have been part of the investigation—detectives from the Kawasaki station would have kept it to themselves—but he would have made a point of learning them anyway.

Or so Sakonju figured, and he decided that straightforwardness would be most effective, indeed the only, possible course.

"He wants me to find the organizers responsible," he said after explaining Yasui's discovery and passing over yesterday's sticker, now sealed in a plastic document cover. "The number's a blind, of course—even if someone tracked it down, it'd be forwarded to a cellular that's changed every couple of weeks. You know how it works."

The patrolman sighed. "What'd you think of the wife?"

"Not over it yet."

He returned the plastic. "I didn't know her personally. Not exactly a small town, here."

"How long have you been posted?"

"Six months." The patrolman's gaze was clear and steady.

Sakonju had expected the answer. The man was too obviously competent to have worked his way only this far after twenty years, and local officers simply didn't reassign that often. But a good policeman wouldn't be shunted to this desolate dead end in the normal progression. "What happened?"

The patrolman dismissed the question. "A job well done is its own reward," he said and, unexpectedly, smiled—a brief glint—and Sakonju nodded. He understood too well how bureaucracy or pettiness or a vindictive superior could push you aside.

"Where'd the girl go to school? The mother rambled a bit."

"Jukan Preparatory. The local high school. When she went at all, of course. Seems she spent more time with her *bosozoku* biker friends than in class."

"Local?"

"Yes, the wards around here. About thirty, counting the wannabes? We know some of them pretty well: theft, fighting, night racing. The *yakuza* have been around lately, recruiting maybe, so you know they're making a name. I don't remember ever seeing her, but the detectives said she was part of the group." There was a slight, barely noticeable emphasis on the word "detectives."

"Fumie? Etsuko? Friends, but I don't have last names."

The patrolman shook his head.

"I guess I need to talk with the *bosozoku*, then."

"Can't give you names and addresses, you know that."

"Where do they collect at night?"

"Hmm." The patrolman sat back in his chair. "What, you think you'll just walk up and chat?"

"Sure."

The tiny room was almost warm now; Sakonju unzipped his jacket and waited. The patrolman turned to a tattered ward map tacked to the wall. "A few months ago, they

had an argument, here." He tapped the map. "We never did find out why, since the guy wasn't talking afterward. But he did something to piss one of them off. They have the usual bikes mostly, but this fellow, the one who got annoyed, he had a Ninja 750. They banged the guy up some, then cuffed his left ankle to the frame right above the pipes."

Sakonju frowned. "Where would they get handcuffs?"

The patrolman lifted his hands impatiently. "Buy them over the counter in Shinjuku nowadays. Anyway, they went for a midnight ride, through the industrial park mostly, and ended up here." He tapped another point several kilometers away. "Guy died, of course. Didn't help that some of the others were trying to run over him themselves while tearing down the access road. We found him later, dumped by that rail bridge. Figured it out but couldn't prove anything."

"So?"

They considered each other.

"Okay," said the patrolman, and again the brief flashing glint. "Along the river, usually. They seem to like this little park." He indicated a small open space on the map, about the size of a baseball diamond, on the floodplain between some industrial addresses and an expressway bridge.

"Anything else I should know?"

The patrolman thought about it. "Have the taxi wait?"

The streetlights, sparse between the shuttered machine shops and wholesalers, glowed through a thin

drizzle. The taxi driver peered at block addresses posted here and there along the walls and was preparing the drive down the same alley for a third time when Sakonju paid him off and stepped out. He could see the river ahead—actually, the concrete wall edging its embankment—and the park couldn't be far.

Still, it turned out to be a good fifteen minutes before he found the *bosozoku*, and then only because their bikes' unmuffled sputtering could be heard a half kilometer away. They were clustered at a pair of crumbling concrete benches, and the headlights pointing this way and that cast an erratic glare that obscured far more than it revealed. Most were smoking, and all were drinking. Glancing over the black denim and leather, Sakonju decided that perhaps five of the twenty were women or girls.

He stepped down from the embankment wall and walked across the hard muddy field. When they noticed, two dropped their cans of *shochu* and ambled forward to meet him. In the headlights' glare he could see only silhouettes, and the engine noise increased his sense of dislocation from the rest of the city.

Sakonju stopped and they looked at each other. "Evening," he said.

Talking died away, and some of the others shouted obscenities; to brief laughter. Sakonju waited.

"Okay," said the nearer tough. "To start, hand over the wallet."

"No."

The man smiled and stepped forward, reaching to grab Sakonju's shoulder. It was an obvious feint, to



be followed by a low strike at his midriff that would have been incapacitating had it landed. But Sakonju turned, deflected the punch, and caught the tough's other forearm, stopping his motion cold.

"Forget it," he said.

The man grunted in anger, yanked his arm free, and closed again, trying a snapkick. A few seconds later he lay unconscious on the ground. Sakonju had blocked with a casual minimum of movement, caught the follow-on elbow slash with his forearm, and immediately punched the side of the man's neck. As he fell, Sakonju struck again, more forcefully and almost faster than others could see, driving him down and away.

A silence, then a flurry as several others converged. In the flashing couple of seconds he saw weapons produced: knives, some metal fighting sticks, but at least no guns.

"Stop!"

A taller young man stepped away from the motorcycle he'd been leaning on and shoved back two of his companions. He shouted again, and the advance halted, more or less.

"Sorry," said Sakonju.

There was no reply, so he added, "He went first, of course."

"Sure." They examined each other dispassionately. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm not police."

The young man almost laughed. "No, you're not. One guy, no gun, walks right up to us? I should say you're not. Senzo-kai, right?"

"No, not them either."

"Fine. Not police, not *yakuza* . . . just out for a stroll, then?"

Sakonju decided the moment was past. He bent briefly to check the man—boy really, not more than sixteen—on the ground. He began to come to groggily, and without much awareness he took Sakonju's hand and let himself be pulled upright. Sakonju nodded, and the boy wobbled off to be comforted by one of the girls.

"His training's okay," Sakonju said. "Emotions need work, but a couple years'll take care of that."

"There's more of us," the leader pointed out. "We decide you get beat, you're going to get beat."

"Maybe. That's not why I came." He looked around. "It's just about Mitsuko."

Immediately the air was thick with fury, and Sakonju let his weight slip back to his rear leg, turning the foot outward a bit and moving his hands away from his hips. But the leader waved them off, his sigh visible even from four meters away. Unwillingly the crowd subsided.

Sakonju and the leader walked away from the others, and across the field the bikes' noise diminished.

"Friend of the family?"

"No." He explained again.

The leader put his hands in his pockets, and they stopped to stare over the dark river. "Yeah, I know about the pictures," he said. "She played it like it was funny, but you could tell she didn't really like us seeing them."

"When did she start?"

After a sideways glare the leader turned back to the river. "She never started. It was just the pictures."



"Oh." Sakonju realized he'd been taken in by the photo himself. "Right."

"She was just so beautiful. It was worth sixty thousand, so she did it." "Why?"

"Her mother never gave her any money. Even for lunch at school—just enough for a rice cake or a couple of rolls." He tried to light a cigarette, but the damp, cold wind made it impossible.

"How often was she with you, evenings?" asked Sakonju.

"Whenever she could get away. Four, five nights a week. She hated that apartment, crammed in with her folks."

"So how'd she manage to study?"

"Study?" The leader coughed. "I never saw her read anything but the comics."

"When did you last see her?"

"A couple of nights before. Thing is, she was going to do some more photos. She told us they'd promised even more money."

Sakonju considered the significance of this suggestion. The leader glared at the lights dim across the river.

After a silence: "You liked her, didn't you?"

"Yeah." An ancient one-man tugboat, barely six feet from waterline to deckhouse roof so it would fit beneath the bridges, chuffed and splashed slowly past. "Yeah, I liked her. She was . . . sweet, sort of, like a truly decent person. Too nice for us, maybe. We all liked her." He coughed again. "I don't know why she jumped."

Sakonju watched the young man's face, its shadowed planes taut, his

eyes focused on some distant, unseen fury.

"You went looking for them later, didn't you." He didn't have to make it a question. "Did you find them?" But there was no reply.

At the embankment road Sakonju glanced back across the field at the bikers, but the leader had turned away, ignoring him, and others were drinking again. He continued across the narrow, deserted street and suddenly collided with a man in a dark raincoat.

"Easy," said the patrolman, clamping Sakonju's automatic, defensive forearm strike with an iron grip. "It's only me."

Sakonju stepped back and almost chuckled. "Checking up?"

"Another dead guy is not what this ward needs." He shrugged. "Find out anything?"

"No. They're just kids."

"You never had to sort out the wounded after a knife fight." He looked curiously at Sakonju. "Speaking of which, why are you still walking around?"

"They weren't really in the mood."

They walked back toward the main avenue through a maze of industrial alleys. At a somewhat busier corner the patrolman indicated a small lit sign reading SUNTORY and said, "Come inside a moment, I've something to show you."

They sat at the narrow wooden bar, the only customers, and the tired woman behind it brought them a liter bottle of beer and two small glasses.

"I went back to the detectives," he said. "Well, not the detectives, a

friend at the divisional headquarters. Disability put him on a desk, but we talk, now and again. He saw the evidence packet and made a copy of this for me."

Sakonju took the Xerox, which had been made of a photograph. Mitsuko was just recognizable, but the quality was so low he could tell little more.

"Afterwards, I assume," he said.

"Yes. From the autopsy. I guess you can't really tell, but the wound pattern is a little ambiguous."

Sakonju could make out nothing.

"Here," said the patrolman, pointing as he drank off half his glass. "This bruise . . . and another, here. The lividity isn't entirely consistent with mortal trauma." He poured some more into both glasses. "Also the nose was broken."

"Not too surprising from eight stories."

"Yes, but so was the left femur and pelvis. Either she landed head-first, and much more than the nose would have been damaged, or she landed on her leg." He paused for a reply, but Sakonju was silent so he continued. "I'd have to say she was roughed up beforehand. It's possible they went too far, but the coroner wasn't willing to speculate about whether she was dead before she went over the rail. He seems not to have wanted to complicate a tidy little suicide."

Sakonju stared into his glass. "I thought it might be something like that. Her friends said she was going back to the thugs for another photo session." He sipped. "But why wouldn't the mother have heard?"

"Ah." The patrolman nodded.

"They talked with her doctor. Pills, of course. Four different kinds of sedation. He owns the pharmacy. She'd been going for, you know . . . change of life problems."

It was Sakonju's turn to pour. Doctors often overprescribed; after the sharply limited reimbursements from National Health, that was often how they actually made a living. The proprietress came out and asked if they wanted another, but he shook his head and she returned to the TV's low mutter in the back.

"No idea who they were, I suppose," said the patrolman.

"No," said Sakonju. His gaze was far away. "Not yet."

Several years before, in the full giddy madness of the bubble economy, a small Tokyo real estate developer put together some deals and became rich. He was in his fifties, and after a lifetime of cheap two or three unit apartments thrown up prefab, on spec, for four percent margins, his sudden success overcame him. Flush with paper wealth and sudden pretensions, he acquired, in rapid order, an imported German convertible, a stand-alone two bedroom house in Nishi-Azabu, a luxury box in the third tier of the Tokyo Giants' new domed stadium—and a young, beautiful wife.

And then, the crash. He was tenacious and had some luck, but the frenzied crowds tumbling down the same slope took him inevitably with them. Properties were foreclosed, buildings left half built, gorgeous architectural renderings abruptly transmuted into mere paper. The

developer became first harried, then desperate, then despairing, and finally mean. Understandably his wife began to stay away, days at a time, and the developer hired Sakonju to find out where.

Well, it wasn't much of a task: from a mix of naiveté and insouciance that Sakonju found oddly appealing, the wife didn't bother concealing her liaison, and he found it a routine matter to acquire photos and even a videotape. But rather than return directly to the developer, who would, mostly likely, have been drunk at that time of night anyway, Sakonju interrupted the pair as they were preparing to leave the hotel room.

"I'm going to give him these," he said, showing them the camera and recorder. "It doesn't matter; if I didn't, the next guy would. But I want you to know beforehand, and I want you to know as well that I'm going to wait until tomorrow."

They took the news calmly, and Sakonju departed. Perhaps she'd been planning to leave anyway. But she went back the same night, probably to pick up some clothing or other items—they never found out what because the developer, who'd worked up a sullen, drunken rage on his own, killed her with a blow from a small bronze statue pulled from a decorative alcove.

Sakonju found the grieving young man again the following week, after the funeral, and gave him the camera, the film still undeveloped inside. The gesture did nothing to relieve his own pointless guilt, but he wanted the man to know he wouldn't be dragged in by an over-

zealous detective who might have found the photos. In fact, with a fairness of spirit unusual in a commonplace *yakuza*—for such was the young man's profession—he didn't blame Sakonju at all. A week later they spent an entire night in a quiet Yokohama bar, drinking hard but not really talking.

The young man was named Ashino, and in the several years since, he'd risen to a position of authority in a two hundred member gang that conducted much of the back-curtain activity in Kawasaki's western wards. Occasionally they met, and once Ashino had even hired Sakonju—who had marginally better contacts in the police—though Sakonju refused any payment.

It took Sakonju a couple of days to find him again, and another before they could meet, but after listening politely Ashino asked to see Mitsuko's advertisement.

"No, I don't know her. Nor the number." He shook his head. "A bad business."

"I didn't expect you'd recognize the name," said Sakonju. "But perhaps you can help me run them down."

"I'd be happy to," and Sakonju didn't doubt it. "But how? There are thousands of these little outfits, they come and go like flies."

"Yes," said Sakonju. "But I might have a thought. The idea is to lure them out." Ashino raised an eyebrow and waited. "Tell me, which is the best hotel at the main station here?"

"The Morning Garden I suppose—a business hotel, seventy or eighty thousand a night."



"Yes, that would seem right. Salesmen, people with the manufacturers around here, like that, I imagine."

Ashino nodded.

"And sometimes, probably, they want some quiet entertainment."

"On occasion."

"What if they make their own arrangements? There's a protocol, right?"

A slow, thin smile came to Ashino as he thought about it.

They didn't even have to go to the hotel itself. Ashino collected a cell phone from a watchful, buzz cut young man who'd been standing near the door, and they moved to a private room in the back. After two calls to his people, with rather cryptic explanations—since cellular calls were about as private as shouting across a crowded train station if the police were interested in you—Ashino handed the phone to Sakonju, who dialed without bothering to look at the ad again.

It was the same brusque woman, and with a different voice he ordered another girl, to the Morning Garden.

"Where?"

Sakonju explained, and the voice objected. "That's rather far, you know."

"Thirty minutes from Shibuya? My wife goes farther to buy groceries! Listen, you sent me someone last time who really made my night and that's why I'm calling again, but if you can't take care of it—"

"No, no, that's fine. But it will take a little longer for her to arrive. Perhaps ninety minutes?"

They concluded the negotiations,

and Sakonju clicked off the phone.

He and Ashino sat mostly silent for the next twenty minutes, comfortable in each other's company but without much to say, before the phone cheeped again. Ashino answered, muttered several acknowledgments, listened, and hung up.

"Jiro says they didn't sound like they really had much experience at this," he said. "Explained the visit and offered the right percentage, but they weren't quite sure about how to get it to us. So he told them they should come by for introductions, like maybe we can talk about business in the future. Gave them a line about how if they've got customers calling from all the way out here they might have something set up we'd be interested in."

Sakonju nodded. "That's sharp."

"I'll send someone over to the hotel to intercept the girl and send her home."

"Have him give her this." Sakonju tried to hand across a ten thousand yen note, but Ashino raised his eyebrows. Sakonju insisted. "It's a long trip for nothing, and not her fault."

They met at another bar, one within the ambit of Ashino's group but not used regularly by them. The seats were covered by worn vinyl, the floor stained. Two laborers, still in the day's khaki, neck towels, and split-toe boots, were arguing fiercely about high school baseball. One of Ashino's three companions nodded affably and leaned over for a whispered comment, and the workmen fell silent. They drank off their canned beers and left.



The two procurers who showed up twenty minutes later seemed surprised to find five men waiting for them. They shook the freezing rain from their nylon jackets, revealing colored shirts—pink and a yellow paisley—that contrasted with the somber black and brown of Ashino's group. He waved them to a narrow booth, cutting short the introductions, and they sat down nervously. Two of Ashino's *yakuza* crowded them from either side and one stood behind the bench, out of their vision. Sakonju slid in across the table.

"Now," said Ashino, who had remained standing. "We are glad you've come. But this has nothing to do with some trivial soapland cut. Instead, this man," he indicated Sakonju, "has some questions." The *yakuza* behind the two suddenly laid one heavy, callused hand on each of their shoulders, and both started. Sakonju pulled out the plastic cover once again, and when they saw the picture, fear began to replace nervousness.

"Okay, sure," said the older of the two—perhaps twenty-five. "That's ours."

"The girl, what did you do to her?"

"Do? Nothing! Took some pictures."

Sakonju sneered for effect.

"Sure."

"I swear, that's all!"

The younger broke in. "We tried to talk her into some part-time calls, but she wasn't interested."

Sakonju shook his head. "Punks like you? I don't think so."

"Look, it's not like we didn't try to convince her. That photo's nice,

right, but in real life, my god—they'd have gotten in line."

"So she turned you down."

"Cold. Took the cash for the photos and left."

"Maybe you banged her up a little, trying to make your point."

At this point the fear became complete. "No, nothing like that! There wouldn't have been any reason to!"

Sakonju asked a few more times, but despite the increasing grip from the *yakuza* behind them, they continued to deny everything but two photo sessions.

"Who are you part of?" he asked suddenly. No response. "Come on, you belong to some gang or another, you're too small not to."

The younger, sweating, finally muttered, "Harutomi."

Sakonju looked at Ashino, who made a brief grimace. "Senzo-kai affiliate," he said. "Small. The cheap rackets—some gambling, some collection." Sakonju sighed and shook his head.

Thirty minutes later they let the two go, terrified but unharmed, seeing them into the rainswept street and watching them disappear toward the main avenue.

"Should we have roughed them some?" asked Ashino.

"No. I believe them. Anyway, you don't need any trouble with Senzo-kai."

Ashino studied his face. "She's still dead."

Sakonju said nothing, then nodded. "Yes," he said wearily. "And I have to tell the husband who did it."

"You know?" Ashino was surprised.

"Yes." The cold knifed through



his jacket. "There's no one else it could be, at this point."

He finally found Yasui three days later, standing in the cemetery, a dark winter drizzle deadening the rushing sound of traffic just past the wall. The crowded memorial stelae and statues, with barely footpaths between them, made a low gray cityscape of their own. Overhead a pair of crows cried harshly from the barren trees.

Yasui was soaked through but was standing utterly still before the small family site. An hour, two—Sakonju decided he could have been here, motionless, all day. He walked up and stood beside him, looking down at the two fresh stones, one clearly just installed. They were surrounded by prayer sticks and several bunches of dead flowers.

"How does one go on?" Yasui took one hand from his padded jacket and pushed back his soaked hair. "How can I get up in the mornings now?" But these weren't questions to which Sakonju had answers.

"It's none of it your fault," he said.

"The police said she walked into the river, just stepped over the rail

and off the embankment. Someone saw and tried to stop her, but she was swept away."

"I know."

Yasui still hadn't looked at him. "I never realized," he said. "She told me Mitsuko was brilliant, who was I to know the difference? I never finished middle school."

"I know it's no comfort," said Sakonju, "but it happens nowadays. All this pressure on the kids, they don't get into the right schools, they don't go anywhere later. Sometimes the mother feels it just as strongly. Sometimes she feels it even more."

"But why? I made a life for myself, you don't have to go to college." His anguish echoed in the damp fog like the crow's cry. "Nothing's worth that."

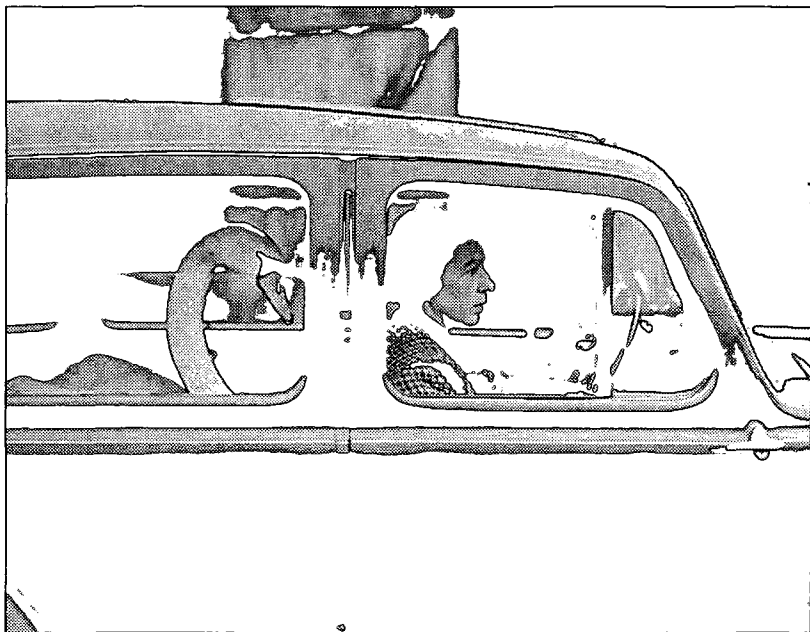
Sakonju said nothing.

"But to have ... to have—" Yasui broke off, then started again. "She must have been beating her for months. Years, maybe!"

"I'm sorry."

Yasui fell silent and went back to staring at the stones. The rain increased with dusk, and they stood without speaking for much longer than Sakonju had intended to stay.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

The Model Murders

C. M. Chan



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/00

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"I don't care," said Phillip Bethancourt rather petulantly and snuffled moistly into his handkerchief.

Detective Inspector Jack Gibbons stared at him, taken aback. Bethancourt was an enthusiastic amateur sleuth and normally showed the keenest interest in Gibbons' cases. This kind of response to an appeal for help was unheard of and left Gibbons at a loss.

"But, Phillip—" he began.

Bethancourt pulled a thermometer out of the pocket of his dressing gown, thrust it firmly into his ear for a moment, and removed it again, peering at the results through his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Over a hundred," he groaned, and plied his nose with the handkerchief again.

"That's too bad," said Gibbons without much sympathy. He had already spent half an hour upon his arrival making soothing noises at his friend and brewing a pot of tea for the invalid. "Phillip, this is one of the nightclubs you're a member of. Hell, you probably know the dead woman—"

"I'm tired of nightclubs," said Bethancourt, popping a zinc tablet into his mouth. "I'm thinking of resigning all my memberships. If it's information about nightclubs you want, you can talk to Marla."

Marla Tate, one of England's top fashion models, was Bethancourt's girlfriend, and while there was no doubt that she knew the nightclub scene thoroughly, she was hardly likely to be receptive to any requests from Gibbons. Marla loathed her boyfriend's hobby and not unjustly

blamed Gibbons for Bethancourt's interest in murder cases.

"I'd rather talk to you," said Gibbons. "But maybe later, if you think she really might know something, you could ring her and—"

"I can't ring her," mumbled Bethancourt around the zinc lozenge. "I've broken up with her."

"You what?"

Gibbons stared at his friend, utterly astonished, while behind the glasses Bethancourt's red puffy eyes met his gaze dully.

"You heard me," said Bethancourt. "We had an enormous row over the phone yesterday. I really think the least she could do when she's got a day off is rally round with a liter of orange juice and take Cerberus for his run in the park."

Gibbons glanced over at the large borzoi hound who was lying mournfully in the doorway.

"Well, yes," he admitted. "But I thought she was in Paris."

"She has to come back next week for a location shoot anyway," said Bethancourt. "She could just as well have come back early, but she wouldn't. She said there was a party she wanted to go to and tried to make out it was my fault for not having stayed in Paris when she wanted me to. So I told her if she wanted to take that attitude she needn't bother ever coming by again and rang off."

Gibbons couldn't help wishing that he had overheard this conversation. In his experience, it was usually Marla who was in a temper and Bethancourt who worked masterfully to calm her down.

"Well, I'm sorry," he said rather

lately. In truth, he didn't take it seriously. When Bethancourt was over his flu, Gibbons was certain he would exert himself to resume the status quo. He'd lost count of the times that Marla had threatened to leave his friend, and no matter what Bethancourt's sin, it had never come to anything in the end.

"So you can see," sniffled Bethancourt, "the last thing I want to talk about at the moment is nightclubs."

"It's not nightclubs per se that I'm interested in," said Gibbons persuasively. "It's a murder that just happened to occur at a particular nightclub. At the Purple Pansy."

"I haven't been there in months."

"The victim," pursued Gibbons doggedly, "looked to me like she might have been a model. I've sent Sergeant Peters round to the agencies, but it would be quicker if you knew her and could identify her."

Gibbons had opened his briefcase while he spoke and now produced some photographs.

"I'm ill," said Bethancourt peevishly. "I'm already nauseated, and you said she was strangled. I don't want to look at dead, strangled people when I'm nauseated."

"She's a bit puffy," admitted Gibbons, eyeing his pictures judiciously, "but still recognizable. Here, have a look."

Before Bethancourt could protest further, the doorbell rang. Cerberus woofed softly and rose, trotting in a businesslike manner toward the door.

"I'll answer it," said Gibbons. "You see if you know the victim."

He dropped the pictures neatly in Bethancourt's lap and made for the

hall before his friend could hand them back. He was more than a little surprised, when he opened the door, to find Marla there.

She was clearly in a temper. Jade-green eyes snapped with anger, and she did not even bother to say hello.

"I might have known you'd be here," she snarled and pushed past both him and the dog to stride down the hall. She glanced into the bedroom; not finding her prey there, continued on to the drawing room.

Bethancourt looked as surprised as Gibbons had, but before he could say anything, she slammed a carton of orange juice down on the nearest coffee table. "There's your bloody orange juice! I hope you're satisfied."

"Thank you, Marla," said Bethancourt meekly. She loomed over him where he lay on the sofa.

"Don't you ever dare threaten me again," she continued. "And let's have one thing clear: just because we're sharing a flat in Paris together doesn't mean I've turned into your nursemaid."

"Obviously not," returned Bethancourt coldly, his delivery somewhat hampered by the nasal quality of his voice. "And I did not threaten you."

"You most certainly did. You threatened to break up with me."

"You're wrong," said Bethancourt flatly. "I didn't threaten to break up with you, I did it. And I meant every word."

They glared at each other, Bethancourt sniffing and Marla quivering with rage.

"Oh, blow your nose," she said at last, turning away. "Where's the damn dog lead?"

"I think it's hanging in the hall," offered Gibbons, since Bethancourt was industriously blowing his nose.

Marla marched out, calling sharply to Cerberus, who actually padded after her. Gibbons in his place would not have. In a moment they heard the door slam shut. "I need another handkerchief," said Bethancourt, still sniffing. "Would you get one out of the bureau for me, Jack?" Gibbons obliged. When he returned, Bethancourt was rubbing fretfully at his nose and staring at the crime scene photographs. He took the fresh linen, blew into it vigorously, and said, "I don't know her, and if I were you, I wouldn't ask Marla just now. But I'll tell you whom you could ask—Spencer Kendrick."

Gibbons nodded. Kendrick was a fashion photographer and a friend of Bethancourt's; Gibbons had met him several times.

"All right," he said, pulling out his notebook. "Where do I find him?" Bethancourt rattled off the address of Kendrick's studio and his phone number, and Gibbons jotted them down. "I'll ring him now and run over if he's there," said Gibbons, collecting his photographs and stuffing them back into his briefcase. He hesitated. "Are you going to be all right?"

"God knows," answered Bethancourt. "Marla's idea of succoring the sick does seem more likely to kill than cure. But no doubt she'll take herself off shortly, and I can get some rest."

Gibbons felt rather awkward as he rode the lift up to Spencer Kendrick's studio and contemplated in-

terviewing an acquaintance in the course of a murder investigation. It would, he reflected, have been much easier if Kendrick had been either a friend or a stranger. Strangers, of course, were the norm, but at least a friend would understand that Gibbons had no choice but to follow where the investigation led and to use every resource in pursuit of that investigation. A mere acquaintance was far more likely to take offense. It was not what he would have wished for on his first case since making inspector at midsummer.

Kendrick was working. The lift left Gibbons out directly into the studio, where his ears were assaulted by blaring music. There were several people in the huge space, but no one paid any attention to him. Off to one side he spotted Kendrick, a tall, lanky man with a grey-streaked ponytail and a calm demeanor. In an industry whose denizens were more than usually histrionic, that demeanor was famous. It was said that no provocation had ever caused Kendrick to lose his composure, not even the dramatic public scene that had led to his rather messy divorce some years earlier.

He was conferring with another man, although how they could hear each other over the music Gibbons couldn't imagine. He made his way over and inserted himself firmly into the conversation.

"Good timing," said Kendrick. "The model's changing and I've just about finished setting up. Come through."

Gibbons caught only a few words of this, especially since Kendrick had a quiet, even manner of speaking,

but willingly followed his host across the room and through a door in the far wall. This part of the loft was apparently soundproofed, as the decibel level dropped considerably as soon as Kendrick closed the door, and they were left with only the pounding of the bass. In the hallway beyond the door Kendrick turned into another room on the left, which proved to be a small office space.

"Have a seat," said Kendrick, dropping his long, lanky frame into an office chair and swiveling it around to face Gibbons. He eyed his guest curiously. "What can I do for you? Are you planning a surprise party for Phillip or something?"

"His birthday's not till December," answered Gibbons. "No, I'd like you to look at some photographs and see if you recognize the woman in them."

Kendrick looked mystified, but reached for the pictures.

"I should warn you," said Gibbons, pausing before handing them over, "that the woman in question was a murder victim. They're not pretty."

Kendrick went very still. "Are you telling me someone I know has died?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered Gibbons. "It's possible she was a model, but unless you identify her, I don't even know that for certain."

Kendrick took the pictures cautiously and looked down at the top one. His lips pursed in distaste, but he gazed steadily at the gruesome photo and then looked up at Gibbons.

"I think I do know her," he said. "Or at least I met her. Her name

was Sandy Something-or-other. She turned up about a month ago. A friend of mine had run across her somewhere and thought she might make a model, so he sent her to me. I took some photos of her and pushed her off on Nancy Blaine. I don't know if Nancy took her on."

Gibbons nodded and jotted down "Blaine's Modeling Agency" in his notebook. "What was your friend's name?" he asked. "I take it he's not in the fashion business himself?"

"No, no." Kendrick shook his head. "His name's Fred Colman. He's an estate agent—I met him fishing up in Scotland. I'll get his number for you." He swung his chair back to face the computer on the desk behind him and called up an address book.

"Do you have copies of the photographs you took of her?" asked Gibbons.

"I have the negatives." Kendrick scrolled down the screens of addresses. "Do you want copies? Here's Fred's number."

"Spencer." A young woman with a no-nonsense look about her appeared in the doorway. "The model's ready."

"I'll be there in a minute. Do you remember that girl who came round about a month ago, Gwennie? She wanted to be a model, and I took some shots of her? Her name was Sandy."

"Sandy Boyd," supplied Gwennie. "Edith's getting itchy, Spence—she wants to break for lunch."

"Have something sent up," replied Kendrick absently. He had turned to a file drawer and was picking through it. "Get Cara and

Monty posed and have Dom take some Polaroids. That should keep Edith busy."

"All right," said Gwennie, "but you'd better come soon."

Kendrick had pulled out a sheet of negatives and was holding it up to the light. "This is it," he said. "Come on." He led Gibbons across the hall and into a large darkroom.

"Phillip tells me you're a member of a nightclub called the Purple Pansy," said Gibbons, leaning back against the door while Kendrick worked.

"That's right. I was there last night, in fact. Why?"

Gibbons sternly suppressed the excitement this statement engendered in him. "That's where Sandy Boyd was murdered," he said evenly. "Last night."

Kendrick turned slowly and stared at him. He did not have an expressive face, which in part accounted for his phlegmatic reputation, but his deep eyes were horrified. It was some moments before he spoke.

"She was murdered in the middle of a nightclub?"

"Not in the middle of it," said Gibbons. "Her body was found in one of the bathroom stalls after the club closed. Can you tell me who was there last night?"

"Lord." Kendrick drew a deep breath and rubbed his face. "You've got an awful job, haven't you? I don't know how you stand it."

"Someone's got to do it. Who was with you last night?"

Kendrick turned back to the negatives. "Shari Neville, Maria Cawfield, and Monty Findlay—they're

all models. Dom Haverford, my assistant, came with us, and so did Helen Bowles—she's a makeup artist. We met some other fashion people there and some musicians. Let's see . . ."

Gibbons jotted down name after name while Kendrick expertly manipulated the negatives. When Kendrick had remembered all he could, there was silence while they watched the images of the dead girl come to life in the basins of chemicals. "That's her, right enough," breathed Gibbons, who had seen the body. The features were unmistakable, but here they were imbued with life and a bright, seductive expression.

"The camera liked her," said Kendrick quietly.

"But somebody didn't," said Gibbons, taking the sheet of proofs. "It's my job to find out who."

It was evening by the time Kendrick made his way to Bethancourt's flat and found his friend shivering with a temperature of one hundred and two.

"It's gone up since I took Cerberus out," he said gloomily, tucking himself back up on the sofa after having let Kendrick in. He waved a hand.

"Help yourself to a drink."

Kendrick did so, pouring himself a healthy shot of single-malt scotch and putting half of it down straightaway.

"Did Marla send you?" asked Bethancourt, making an obvious effort to pull himself together.

"No," answered Kendrick, settling himself in an overstuffed armchair.

"She did come by, though. She seems a bit peeved with you."

"Understatement of the year," mumbled Bethancourt, huddling into an afghan. "I don't care just at the moment."

"I take it life together in Paris has not been going smoothly?"

Bethancourt shrugged. "I can't talk about it now," he said. "I can't think. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to deal with Marla when one's brain isn't functioning properly?"

"I can see how it might be a problem." Kendrick sipped at his drink. "Your friend Jack came by today. I think I managed to incriminate myself quite nicely."

"Incriminate?" echoed Bethancourt, alarmed.

"I was at the Purple Pansy last night."

"Oh. So were lots of other people. I shouldn't worry about it."

"And I knew the girl."

"Oh, Lord, you hadn't slept with her, had you?"

Kendrick snorted gently. "What do you take me for, Phillip? She couldn't have been more than seventeen."

"Well, I didn't know that," retorted Bethancourt. "It's not so easy to tell the age of a corpse. Then if you hadn't been having a torrid affair with her, I don't see what you're so worried about."

"Phillip," said Kendrick patiently, "there were mostly fashion people there last night—the Purple Pansy caters to us. It was only a month ago that I sent the girl off to Nancy Blaine, so how many people in the business do you think she might

have known by now? Anyone who knew her and was there last night has to be a prime suspect."

"Jack'll sort it out," said Bethancourt wearily. "He's a bright lad. You've got the wind up over nothing, Spence."

At seven o'clock in the evening, Jane Callaway still looked hung over. She nonetheless managed to go a shade paler when told of her friend's murder and dropped into a chair.

"I've been wondering why she didn't ring me back," she said, a little blankly. "I left messages for her twice today."

"Yes," said Gibbons, who had spent the afternoon at the dead girl's flat, "I know."

According to Nancy Blaine, Jane Callaway was the closest friend Sandy Boyd had made since she had come to London. Jane was two years older and also new to the business of modeling, although she had been at it for nearly a year as opposed to Sandy's bare month. She was rail-thin and looked, at this moment, graceless.

"I understand you were at the Purple Pansy last night," said Gibbons.

"That's right," Jane nodded. "Yesterday was the last day of the catalogue shoot we'd been working on. A whole group of us went to dinner and on to the club to celebrate." She paused. "It was Sandy's first big job."

"Were you in the ladies' room with her at any time?"

Jane avoided his eye, no doubt in remembrance of what they had

been doing in the ladies' room. Forensics had picked up cocaine residue from nearly every part of the thick carpet in the large anteroom, which was hung with mirrors and furnished with padded stools and benches. The stalls where Sandy Boyd had been found were in an adjoining room, running in a long bank beyond the washbasins. Unlike the usual prefabricated metal, each toilet was ensconced in what was essentially a closet with a firm, ceiling-to-floor wall between each, complete with wallpaper and moldings. The doors, too, were like ordinary household doors with knobs that locked. Since the doors could not be opened even from the inside unless the knobs were unlocked, the club did not usually have a problem with locked, untenanted stalls, but they had a key just in case. It was with the use of the key that they had discovered the body.

"We went to the ladies' a couple of times," Jane admitted finally.

"Did you use the stalls?"

"Once. But that was soon after we arrived, a little before midnight."

Gibbons nodded, jotting this down. "When was the last time you saw her?" he asked.

Here he ran into the same trouble he'd had while interviewing the other witnesses at Kendrick's studio. No one, it appeared, kept track of time in nightclubs. Laboriously he took Jane step by step through the night—whom she had danced with, when she had gotten drinks, whom she had talked to in the ladies' room. She and Sandy had stuck together at first, but after an hour or two they had each been

courted by different men in different groups and had lost sight of each other. Jane had arrived home at about two thirty A.M. and had looked for Sandy before she left but had not seen her.

"Did she have any enemies?" asked Gibbons.

Jane looked merely puzzled. "Enemies?" she echoed. "Well, no. I mean, she hardly even knew anybody."

"What about her boyfriend?" pursued Gibbons. "Was he there last night?"

"Jonesy?" Jane was surprised. "Not that I saw. Sandy certainly never mentioned ringing him."

"Do you have his name and address?"

"Sure."

Gibbons gathered this information and took his leave, reflecting that Jane had been marginally more helpful than anyone else he'd interviewed. At least she had been able to supply a partial list of the men Sandy Boyd had danced with.

The summer sun had not yet set, and Gibbons determined to talk to Sandy's boyfriend before he stopped for dinner. He was considerably less enthusiastic about this than he had been before he spoke with Jane Callaway. If the boyfriend had not accompanied them to the nightclub, it was unlikely in the extreme that he had been there at all. To gain entry to the Purple Pansy, one had to be either a member or the guest of one, and Robert Jones had no fashion connections beyond Sandy herself.

The interview was even less helpful than Gibbons had hoped, be-

yond adding to his growing picture of the victim. Jones was a friend from Sandy's hometown in Gloucestershire who had come to London to attend university. Sandy had stayed with him when she first arrived, and they had quickly started a relationship. Sandy's head had been turned, however, by her acceptance at Nancy Blaine's agency, and even Jones didn't think their relationship would have lasted much longer. In fact, he added glumly, she had told him she would be tired after work yesterday and wanted an early night. He'd had no idea that she had instead been dining and dancing with the fashion crowd.

Moreover, he had an alibi. He and his roommate had sat up till four in the morning sharing a bottle of Bell's and having a deep discussion about *Life*, as students were wont to do.

In fact, Jones had the only motive Gibbons had thus far managed to dig up, which made it all the more deplorable that he seemed a complete washout. Sandy's career had hardly been stellar thus far; she could not have inspired professional jealousy. She might have left some ill will behind her in Gloucester, but how anyone from there could have turned up at one of London's more exclusive nightclubs was beyond Gibbons.

Once again Gibbons thought of Bethancourt and was correspondingly incensed at his friend. Bethancourt had dogged his footsteps on virtually any case of interest he had ever worked on, and now, just when his help would have been truly useful, he refused to give it. Well,

thought Gibbons, the flu didn't last forever, and the way this case was shaping up, there would be plenty of time for Bethancourt to weigh in later.

Four days later Bethancourt's temperature had returned to normal, and he was regretting some of the actions he'd taken while feverish. It had, for instance, been wholly ridiculous for him to expect Marla to nurse him; she was not and never had been that sort of person. Rum-maging ruthlessly through his own motivations, he admitted to himself that he would never have thought of asking her before they had begun to live together in Paris. Because of that change in their relationship, he had been ignoring the person Marla was and arbitrarily assigning her traits belonging to some purely theoretical idea of a wife. That too was ridiculous. He either wanted Marla or he didn't; he could not have some edited version of her. At any rate, he would have to do something to make it up to her.

Neatly ignoring the fact that he had not broached the problem of whether he did want her or not, he turned his thoughts to Gibbons. He hadn't been very helpful there, either, nor to poor Kendrick who, despite his phlegmatic countenance, was desperately worried that Gibbons suspected him of murder. That at least should be easy to put right. He rang Scotland Yard and left a message for Gibbons, who duly turned up that evening with a bag of Chinese takeaway.

"Why me?" he moaned, staring in-

to his wonton soup. "My first case as an inspector and I have to pull this out of the hat. They'll probably demote me back to sergeant."

"Nonsense," said Bethancourt cheerfully. "You're only tired. What have you got so far?"

"A great deal of nothing," answered Gibbons. He pulled out his notebook and propped it against his water glass. "Sandy Boyd had never been to the Purple Pansy before. She went there that night with a group that included several men, and to begin with she and her friend Jane Callaway stuck with them, dancing with the male models and so on. Spencer Kendrick and his group arrived a half hour or so after Sandy, and Spencer claims not to have seen her. His assistant, Dom Haverford, did notice her at the bar and danced with her once but said she went off then with Ralph Andrews, another model, and he didn't notice her after that. I've got a list of other men she danced with, but aside from the men she came with, no one is sure when she danced with whom."

"I've met Ralph," said Bethancourt, spooning up the last of his soup. "He's the heterosexual Don Juan of the fashion set. It's those dark good looks, I suppose. What does he say?"

"He'd met her before," answered Gibbons, flipping over a page of his notebook. "He's with Nancy Blaine's agency, too, but claims Sandy was too much of a country bumpkin to interest him. Says she asked him to dance and he obliged just to be polite. He ditched her as soon as the dance was finished. He says he had-

n't noticed her there until she approached him and didn't notice her again. He went home that night with Bethany Rillouse but they didn't leave the club until after three, so he could have murdered Sandy first. But I can't see why he would want to."

"Not on the face of it, no," agreed Bethancourt. "Finish your soup, Jack, or I'll have eaten all the chicken before you get to it. God, it's good to have an appetite again."

"Sandy's boyfriend, Robert Jones," went on Gibbons, ignoring this advice, "has a beautiful motive. They started seeing each other when she first got to London, but he's only a student at London University and they were drawing apart pretty quickly. Even he admits that. Moreover, I got Jane Callaway, Sandy's new best friend, to admit that Sandy had been unfaithful to Jones twice in the last two weeks. He claims not to have known about it, but then he would do."

"But how," objected Bethancourt, "could a university student get into the Purple Pansy? They don't let just anyone in, you know."

"That's just it," groaned Gibbons. "Sergeant Peters has spent the last two days digging but has failed to find a single acquaintance of Jones's who is a member, or known to go to fashionable nightclubs. On top of that, no one remembers seeing him there, and he's got an alibi."

"Not promising," agreed Bethancourt, "but it's no cause for despair. How about the chaps she was unfaithful to him with?"

"One-night stands," replied Gibbons. "Or, in the case of Bill Mack-

erson—a true lowlife if ever I met one—a one-afternoon stand. From what Jane says, neither of them meant a thing to Sandy. She was only seventeen, and Jane thinks Jones was her first lover. You know what that's like."

"God, yes," said Bethancourt remniscently. "At seventeen everyone's sex-obsessed, especially if one's just discovered it. I suppose if one's a girl indiscriminate sex is possible."

"The point is," said Gibbons, "it doesn't get me any farther along. As best I can tell, she was just a feckless seventeen-year-old, over the top about being a model. Why should anyone want to kill her?"

"Perhaps it was an accident," said Bethancourt slowly. "It's not unknown for people at the Purple Pansy to adjourn to the loo to do a little cocaine privately and have it off if they're so inclined. Strangulation during sex isn't that uncommon."

"No, it's not, but she hadn't had sex," answered Gibbons. He was beginning to feel better, getting all this off his chest, and reapplied himself to his soup. "She'd had some cocaine and several drinks as well as what the pathologist describes as a wonderfully rich dinner, but she hadn't had sex. And she was very neatly dressed when we found her. She was wearing a miniskirt that had ridden up, but that's probably because of the way she fell, and her knickers were intact and on straight."

"Curiouser and curiouser," mused Bethancourt. "By the way, do you suspect Spencer?"

"Not really," sighed Gibbons,

reaching for the moo goo gai pan. "It's perfectly possible, of course, but why would a successful, well-off man want to kill a seventeen-year-old girl he'd only met once before and done a favor for?" He paused thoughtfully, spoon poised over the carton. "Is Spencer one of the ones who's been known to go off to the loo for a little fun?"

"Not since I've known him," said Bethancourt truthfully. "That kind of thing is more reserved for the younger crowd. And Spencer doesn't take drugs any more, although I believe he indulged at one time. He probably drinks less than I do."

"That would account for his having a clearer memory of events that night than anyone else," said Gibbons. "Unfortunately, since he didn't see Sandy Boyd, it's not much help."

"Forget about motive," said Bethancourt. "Don't you have *any* suspects?"

"I suspect every man there who had the least connection with Sandy Boyd," replied Gibbons gloomily. "But I've nothing to whittle them down with. It appears that Jane Callaway last saw Sandy sometime after one but couldn't find her when she wanted to leave about two fifteen. Everyone has at least a vague idea of what time they arrived at the club, and most of them think they know what time they got home. In between it's hopeless. I wish to God I could get a break in this case."

"Have a fortune cookie," said Bethancourt sympathetically, dropping one on Gibbons' plate. Gibbons broke it open and began to laugh as he read the little strip of pink paper

within. "What is it?" asked Bethancourt.

"It says, 'Be careful what you wish for,'" answered Gibbons.

The break came two mornings later when Abigail Waite, a far more prominent model than Sandy Boyd, was found dead in an alley adjoining the Footlights nightclub. She too had been strangled, and there were deep bruises on her upper arms. But unlike Sandy Boyd's, her body had been carefully arranged after death, with her hands on her breasts and her legs spread apart. She had not been sexually assaulted.

Detective Superintendent Carmichael, Gibbons' superior, immediately handed the case over to Detective Superintendent Reginald Dancy, the Yard's expert on serial murders. Gibbons spent a long day closeted with Dancy and Dr. Marilyn Baines, the psychological profiler, while they picked over every bit of knowledge he had accumulated about the Boyd case. Before the day was half over, he had a headache, but Dancy seemed to feel he had done well.

"I'm not sure," said Dancy, scratching his head, "that we actually have a mass murderer here. It could equally well be a case of someone who had a concrete reason to kill both of these women."

He glanced at Dr. Baines, who nodded agreement. "Have you looked into that at all, inspector?"

"I was just starting on that this morning," answered Gibbons. "On the face of it, no, there's no connec-

tion. The two women didn't run in the same circles, nor did they work for the same agency. They did know some of the same people, of course, but on Boyd's side those people were mere acquaintances while Waite had worked with them all for years. The only obvious common thread is that they were both models."

"I see," said Dancy. "Still, some connection might turn up. I think you ought to continue with that aspect of the investigation, inspector."

"Another possibility," put in Dr. Baines, "is that Abigail Waite was killed by a copycat. If so, it was someone who knew her and wanted her dead, and took advantage of Boyd's death to make it look like the same person killed Waite."

This had not occurred to Gibbons, but he had no time to consider it; Dr. Baines was continuing.

"The other possibility," she said, "is that we do have a serial killer here, in which case he's a fledgling one. I would say Sandy Boyd was probably his first victim and that he didn't intend to kill her at the outset. Having done so, however, he found it very satisfying and took his chance to do it again. Sandy Boyd he left lying where she fell, but he spent at least a little time with Abigail Waite's body, as you can see. What alarms me is that normally, with a serial murderer, there are longer gaps between his earlier victims; the frequency increases as he becomes more addicted to the act. This man killed again in a week. If it is a serial murderer, then I think he will kill again very soon."

A somber silence followed these

words. Then Dancy said, "Who do you think we're looking for, then?"

Dr. Baines shrugged. "There's not a lot to go on just yet. A white male in his twenties, although I wouldn't absolutely rule out anything up to mid-thirties. There's obviously a sexual element to his crimes, and my first guess is that we're looking for someone who's sexually frustrated, possibly impotent. On the other hand, he could be someone who uses women for sex but otherwise holds them in contempt. In either case I think he meant to have sex with Sandy Boyd and she refused him. But I don't think he even attempted sex with Abigail Waite. I believe when he killed Sandy Boyd, he found something that made him feel even better than sex, and he was looking for it again when he encountered Abigail Waite."

"Nearly all these men Gibbons has down in the Boyd case are white and in their twenties," remarked Dancy, frowning over the list. "None of them is older than thirty-seven."

"Yes." Dr. Baines fixed Gibbons with a steely eye. "If we do have a serial killer here," she said, "he is almost certainly someone you've interviewed, inspector."

Serial killers did not interest Bethancourt at all, and if he had known of this development, he might have happily retired into his convalescence and left Gibbons to investigate on his own. As it was, he went over to Kendrick's studio that evening as soon as he had heard the news.

He found Kendrick and his assistant alone, putting the studio to

rights after the day's session, both of them in a somber mood. Kendrick seemed relieved to see his friend.

"I'm glad you got here before the police," he said. "It'll be nice to have someone here on my side when they come."

"You were at Footlights last night?" asked Bethancourt, not wholly surprised but nonetheless unhappy at the news.

"Yes," said Kendrick. He appeared, as usual, perfectly composed, but his hands shook as he bent to pet Cerberus and motioned Bethancourt to a chair. "I've been rather avoiding the Purple Pansy lately."

"Very understandable," said Bethancourt, but he felt uncomfortable. He was certain himself of Kendrick's innocence but was well aware that the number of people who had known both women and had been at both nightclubs were few and that his friend was fast becoming a prime suspect.

"Marla was there, too," Kendrick added, and Bethancourt's previous thoughts were banished by a stab of guilt.

"I should have rung her," he muttered. "I never thought. I'd better do it now."

Marla, however, was less upset than Bethancourt had anticipated. She had not been particular friends with Abigail Waite though of course she had known her, and it had apparently never occurred to her that Kendrick was now a firm suspect by virtue of his presence at both murder sites.

When Bethancourt returned from

the phone, Kendrick and Haverford were settled with beers, drinking silently. Haverford, like his employer, was a quiet man, though not with Kendrick's renowned control and with considerably less self-assurance, for which his youth might be responsible. Bethancourt did not know him well and knew nothing at all about his personal life, but he suddenly realized that in his concern over Kendrick he had been ignoring an equally likely suspect.

"Marla's coming round," announced Bethancourt, picking up the beer bottle left for him on the table and opening it. "So you'll have two on your side. Were you there last night as well, Dom?"

Haverford nodded. "I saw Abbie there—she was sitting with you, Spence—but I think I left before she did. I'm not sure."

"I think you did," agreed Kendrick. He stared at his beer. "I asked her to come home with me," he said. "I wish to God she had."

"You did?" asked Bethancourt, surprised. "What about Celia?"

Haverford grinned suddenly. "Celia," he said, "is a thing of the past."

"So she is," agreed Kendrick, but without the smile; whatever scene Haverford had witnessed clearly held less amusement for him than for his assistant. "Abbie and I have had an off-and-on thing going for years," he continued. "But last night she said she'd stayed out later than she meant to already and wanted to get home. I can't believe she's dead."

Bethancourt stared at him. When he had heard of Abbie's death, the

first question that had occurred to him was how the two murders could possibly be connected, and here was Kendrick handing him the answer on a platter.

"I'm sorry, Spence," he said.

Kendrick sighed. "Well," he said, "day after tomorrow we're all off to Scotland for four days, and that'll be a relief."

"Oh, right," said Bethancourt. "That's the outdoor shoot with Marla, isn't it?"

"She and three others," said Haverford. He drained the last of his beer and rose. "I'll get some more," he said.

Bethancourt watched him go. "How sure are you that he left before Abbie last night?" he asked.

"Pretty sure," said Kendrick. "He said goodnight while she was still sitting with me. In fact, it was then, after he'd taken himself off, that she checked the time and said she'd stayed out later than she'd meant."

"But you didn't see him actually go out the door."

"Of course not. You can't see the door from the back room, you know that. What are you on about, Phillip? You can't possibly think it's Dom. He barely knew Abbie."

Bethancourt could hardly explain that he was clutching at straws to avoid seeing Kendrick himself as the prime suspect.

"I just don't know anything about him," he said.

"He's a quiet, hardworking sort," said Kendrick. "He comes out to the clubs and to parties, but he usually leaves early. Well, earlier than me."

"Does he date the models?" asked Bethancourt.

"Not that I know of. He's not their type—a bit on the geeky side."

They fell silent as Haverford returned with the beers just as the bell rang. "I'll get it," he said. "I'm already up."

"That'll be Marla," said Bethancourt.

"Are you on speaking terms again?" asked Kendrick.

"Sort of," said Bethancourt cautiously. "I sent flowers round to her flat with an apology once my temperature came down, but I haven't been feeling well enough to really make it up to her yet. In fact, this represents my first real emergence into the world."

"I appreciate it," said Kendrick. "I was rather dreading facing Jack."

"Well, we'll both have to now," said Haverford, returning from his errand. "He's on his way up with Marla."

Despite Bethancourt's words on the phone, Marla clearly did not consider Gibbons a threat. She was giving him a list of names as they emerged from the lift, which he was jotting down in his notebook. The awkwardness of Gibbons' arrival was done away with by Marla's attitude, for which everyone was grateful, and only Marla herself seemed unconscious of it.

"I've been giving Jack a list of the men who were at Footlights last night," she announced, taking a beer and sinking down on the floor beside Cerberus, whom she patted absently. "I've done as many as I can remember—no, wait. Jeff Burley was there, too."

"She's been very helpful," said Gibbons, writing down Burley's name and favoring the room at large with a bland smile. "I'd like to see if you can add any names to her list, and then we can work on what everyone was doing when and if anyone you know had a connection to both women."

Bethancourt could take no part in this activity, and in truth he was beginning to feel a little fatigued. The beer, he decided, had definitely been a mistake, and after Kendrick and Haverford had added one or two names, he got up quietly and went off to make himself a cup of tea. He drank some of Kendrick's orange juice while he waited for the kettle to boil and was just heading back when Gibbons appeared.

"You're looking a bit peaked," he observed.

"I feel it," answered Bethancourt, sipping his tea. "How did it go?"

"Pretty well," answered Gibbons. "We've narrowed down our suspects nicely." He met Bethancourt's eyes squarely. "Kendrick's still on the short list."

"I assumed he would be," said Bethancourt. "What about Dom?"

"He's there, too," answered Gibbons, "although both he and Kendrick seem to think he left before Abigail Waite did last night. I'll have to check that. Then there's Ralph Andrews and Monty Finlay. They're both models, and they both knew Abigail Waite well."

"You said Ralph danced with Sandy Boyd at the Purple Pansy."

"So did Monty Finlay. He's with Blaine's Agency, too. There are a couple of other men who were at

both nightclubs, but none with a connection to both women."

"Yes, but what possible reason could anyone have for killing both Sandy and Abbie?" asked Bethancourt. "It doesn't tie together, Jack."

"No," admitted Gibbons. "That's why it's looking more and more like a serial killer."

"What?" said Bethancourt, startled. "Who said anything about serial killers?"

"It's a very real possibility, Phillip," said Gibbons. "Carmichael's already handed the case to Dancy, and it would certainly explain why I've been unable to find anyone at all who wanted to murder Sandy Boyd."

"Oh God," moaned Bethancourt.

"Unfortunately," continued Gibbons, "if that's the case, we don't really know what's setting him off. Dr. Baines thinks both women may have refused to go to bed with him."

"Well, that would rule out Spencer," said Bethancourt with some relief. "He'd been sleeping with Abbie for years."

"Yes," said Gibbons, "but not that night. That night she turned him down."

Bethancourt found nothing to say.

He took Marla off shortly after Gibbons left. During the interview she had finally grasped that the police considered Kendrick and Haverford suspects, and although appreciative of her outrage, they did not know how to respond to it.

"Jack's a fool if he thinks Spencer or Dom did it," she fumed as they emerged from the building.

Bethancourt, opening his mouth to point out that the suspect list was growing very short, realized in time that Marla would hardly have been taken into Gibbons' confidence about this and refrained from comment.

"Do you want to come back to the flat with me?" he asked instead. "We could pick up some takeaway on the way."

"I've already got a dinner date," said Marla. "I'm meeting Marcia and Monty and Ken and Harvey. You can come, too, if you like."

Bethancourt, who felt that a relapse of his flu was imminent, was about to refuse when the names she had mentioned sank in.

"Monty Finlay?" he asked.

"That's right," Marla answered, unaware that Monty Finlay was one of only half a dozen men who could be placed at both murder scenes. "Marcia's dragging him along. I think she's trying to woo him back, although why she would want to is beyond me. If a man can't make up his mind whether he's straight or gay, I can't see the point in bothering with him."

"I didn't realize Monty had a problem that way."

"Oh, it's all high drama," said Marla. "Very tiresome, really."

"I'll come," said Bethancourt. He did not think he would learn anything by dining with Finlay, but he simply couldn't allow Marla, all unsuspecting, to spend the evening with a possible multiple murderer.

"Then we should find a cab and go now," said Marla, glancing at her watch.

"What about Cerberus?"

"Oh, he'll be all right. It's only Pellini's."

If Marla thought, as Bethancourt suspected she did, that she would be leaving the subject of murder behind, she was greatly mistaken. The others were already gathered at the restaurant, and they looked somber. Once Bethancourt had managed to make a space for Cerberus to lie down in without seriously impeding the waiter's ability to get to the table, Ken Potter introduced the topic at once.

"The police have been round to see Monty," he announced.

Finlay's impossibly handsome face was unhappy.

"They've been talking to me all afternoon," he said. "Who I danced with last night, what I did, what time I left, a list of everyone I've ever slept with, how I felt about them, how I felt about Abbie—God, I thought it was never going to end."

Marla was startled and obviously displeased. "Why you, Monty?"

"I don't know," he said. "They don't tell you anything, they just ask questions."

Ken Potter and Harvey Nelson had apparently forgotten what Bethancourt spent most of his time doing, but Marla looked straight at him and asked, "Do you know, Phillip?"

"Well," he said reluctantly, "were you at both nightclubs on the nights of the murders?"

"Yes," answered Monty, "but so were lots of other people. Why me?"

"And why would anyone, let alone Monty here, want to kill both Abbie and whatever-her-name-was?" asked Potter.

"Sandy," put in Finlay. "Her name was Sandy. I met her at the agency, but I don't think she even knew Abbie. Abbie didn't work for Blaine's."

"Well, they might have met on a shoot," said Marcia.

Finlay shook his head. "I don't think so. Sandy had only just started modeling—that catalogue shoot was her first job, and Abbie certainly wouldn't have worked on that."

"No," agreed Marla, whose expression was beginning to look rather frozen.

"I don't want to be insensitive," said Bethancourt, "but I'm awfully hungry. Have the rest of you ordered yet?"

Marla shot him a grateful glance as the others replied in the negative, and the inspection and discussion of the menu got them safely off the subject. But Bethancourt continued to watch a much-subdued Monty Finlay as the conversation turned to other topics. He admitted to having known Sandy Boyd, had known her well enough to dance with her on the night of her death. He had certainly known Abbie Waite and had worked with her on many occasions. Bethancourt didn't think they'd ever dated, but might that not have been because Abbie had refused him? Was Finlay the type of man in whom a refusal would have sparked a vicious response? Bethancourt didn't know him well but had, from their limited contact, always thought him too handsome for his own good and not terribly bright. That argued against his having committed two rather clever murders that had so far stumped the police.

Kendrick was very clever indeed. The thought came unbidden to Bethancourt's mind, and he regarded it reluctantly now it was there. Of all Gibbons' suspects, he had to admit Kendrick was by far the most intelligent. On the other hand, he assured himself, returning his gaze to Finlay, the murderer might just have been very lucky. And it mightn't be a serial killer at all.

On the following evening Gibbons arrived at Bethancourt's flat to find his friend packing.

"Going back to Paris?" he asked, a little surprised that Bethancourt would desert him in the middle of a case.

"No," answered Bethancourt. "I am going to Scotland. Marla's doing a shoot up there with Spencer and Dom. I can't possibly let her go alone."

"No, of course not," said Gibbons, a little at a loss. He did not know how to say he was sorry for forcing Bethancourt to suspect his friends of murder, especially since it wasn't actually his fault. All the same, he felt guilty.

"Unless," continued Bethancourt hopefully, "you've come to tell me you've solved the case? Then I wouldn't have to go and, frankly, I don't want to."

"No such luck," answered Gibbons, sinking into the bedroom chair while Bethancourt began rolling up socks. "In fact I came to see if you'd had any new ideas."

Bethancourt shook his head. "I don't know anything about serial murderers," he said. He did not tell his friend of his personal thoughts

about Kendrick because he was half ashamed of them. Bethancourt had met any number of murderers in the course of meddling with Gibbons' cases, but he had never encountered a serial killer, nor had he given much thought to them. Kendrick's innocence had been unquestioned in his mind, but when the possibility of a serial killer had been raised, he wondered suddenly what might lie behind such a perfect facade as Kendrick had built for himself. He had never seen the man impassioned about anything, and it came to him that if such iron control were to break, it might do so in a horrible manner, like a dam giving way all at once. But he would let Gibbons think that out for himself.

"I did find out," he added, "that both Ralph Andrews and Monty Finlay tried it on with Abbie at one time or another, but she never slept with models and told them so. But I expect you know that."

"Yes," said Gibbons, "they both admitted it."

"I suppose you still think that the murders are serial killings?"

"I've found nothing to indicate that they're not," replied Gibbons. "And if they are, there's still nothing to choose among the suspects. It could have been any of them."

"Brilliant," muttered Bethancourt.

"If it makes you feel any better," said Gibbons, "Spencer and Dom are not at the top of my list at the moment, at least where Abigail Waite is concerned. Kendrick apparently settled down at a table in the back room that night, and everyone I've

talked to remembers seeing him there. He did get up two or three times, by his own admission—twice to dance and once to visit the loo—but in everyone's memory he stayed at that table more or less continuously. It's not conclusive, of course, but it's suggestive. And there's a consensus that Dom left before Abigail, though again it's not conclusive, since no one but Spencer noticed her leaving and he doesn't remember the time."

"Which means I'm probably going to Scotland for nothing," said Bethancourt, throwing the socks into his bag with more force than was necessary.

Bethancourt had been worried that Marla might be suspicious of his sudden decision to spend four days watching her work in the Scottish countryside, but as it turned out, he need not have been concerned. Marla wasn't feeling well, and there was nothing on her mind but the deteriorating state of her health.

It was Kendrick who immediately surmised the reason for Bethancourt's presence and gave him a saddened look. The fact that there was not the slightest reproach in his eyes made Bethancourt feel guiltier than ever, and he was inspired to lie like a trooper to try to make up for it.

"I thought," he murmured confidentially to Kendrick as they all gathered in the rustic inn's lounge, "this trip would make it up to Marla for my being so bad-tempered while I was sick."

Kendrick appeared reassured, although not entirely convinced. He glanced over to where Marla sat, blowing her nose fiercely and glowering in her boyfriend's general direction. "The gesture doesn't seem to have gone down very well."

"Well, no," admitted Bethancourt. "I hadn't counted, you see, on her not feeling quite well."

"Ah," Kendrick shrugged. "That's fate for you. At least she'll have today to rest up. The rain's coming down in buckets."

The skies were clear when they had arrived late the previous evening, but this morning it was raining hard and showed no sign of letting up. Emily Hall, the much-tried fashion editor of the magazine, had heaved a tremendous sigh and released everyone to their own devices while she and Kendrick went out to scout locations. Unfortunately, once they'd finished breakfast, there was nothing to do, and the entire crew was now milling about the lounge at a loss. Except for Marla, who announced she was going back to bed.

"That's a good idea," said Bethancourt. "If you rest up today, I'm sure you'll be better tomorrow. Shall I bring you up some tea?"

"I don't want tea," she snapped, "I want to sleep."

"Well, I'll look in on you later."

She waved an irritated hand and sought the stairs. Bethancourt watched her go, wishing he dared remind her to lock the door. Then he felt self-conscious at the thought. What, after all, was he so on edge about? Kendrick was leaving with Emily, and Haverford had retired to his room to deal with his e-mail,

and neither of them were any longer at the top of Gibbons' suspect list. There was not the slightest reason for him to have dragged himself all the way up here.

The morning slowly wore away while the rain pounded down. Bethancourt, having walked Cerberus and gotten thoroughly soaked, changed as quietly as he could and then decided to follow Haverford's example and get a little business done on his laptop. Despite his earlier thoughts he locked the door behind him when he left the room, leaving Marla asleep within.

Kendrick and Emily returned for lunch, having settled on their locations, and then Kendrick consternated everyone by announcing that he was going back out to fish.

"In the rain?" demanded Lydia Porter, one of the models.

"The rain won't matter to the fish," replied Kendrick. "Emily and I saw a nice stream while we were out, and the landlord assures me there's trout in it. If I do well enough, we can have trout for dinner. I take it no one else wants to come?"

"Good God, no," said Vera Johns, shuddering.

In the late afternoon the rain subsided to a steady drizzle, and Bethancourt once more belted on his Burberry and ventured out with his dog. Cerberus gamboled happily along the hills, oblivious to the rain, while his master trudged behind. Eventually, Cerberus picked up Kendrick's scent and galloped off to greet a known friend. Whether or not Kendrick had murdered two women mattered not at all to the dog.

Blind loyalty, reflected Bethancourt, making his way more slowly down the hill toward the stream. An admirable trait in a dog, foolish in a man. And yet how could one be forgiven for suspecting the worst of a friend?

"How's Marla?" asked Kendrick as Bethancourt came up.

"Sleeping again. I'm afraid her temperature's gone up. How's the fishing?"

"Fine. It'll be trout for dinner tonight, I think."

"Don't bother catching one for Marla," said Bethancourt. "Her appetite's gone. It was all I could do to get her to eat a little toast at lunch."

Kendrick looked sympathetic. "Well, even if things aren't going as you planned, at least she'll be grateful you rallied round to take care of her."

"Actually, no," said Bethancourt glumly. "She seems to have this idea that I'm doing it just to rub her nose in the fact that she didn't nurse me through my flu. I tried to point out to her that I could not possibly have known she was going to get sick when I said I'd come, but logic has never been Marla's strong point."

"Ah. Well, she had to put up with your bad temper when you were ill, so I suppose it's your turn."

Kendrick withdrew his line from the stream and cast it out again. "How are things going in Paris, by the way? I've been meaning to ask."

Bethancourt was not deceived by the casualness of this remark.

"Was she complaining?" he asked.

"Not complaining, exactly. It seemed to come as a surprise to her that you actually enjoy spending

an evening curled up with a book. Apparently she thought that was just something you did when better entertainment was unavailable."

Bethancourt was a little startled. "That's odd," he said, frowning. "She has never mentioned it."

"It's strange how little one can know of a person, even when one's been intimate with them for years," said Kendrick, and Bethancourt shifted uncomfortably, wondering if that had a double meaning. But Kendrick continued evenly, "It was like that with Dorrie, my wife. I was a lot wilder back then but I still liked to have some quiet times, and it never occurred to me until after we were married that Dorrie didn't. In fact, I never even noticed how little we had in common."

Bethancourt watched the play of the line in the water. "Do you mean that you don't think Marla and I have much in common either?"

"I would never presume," said Kendrick dryly, "to give anybody advice on relationships. My track record speaks for itself—I don't know the first thing about them. Or at least not about successful ones. Anyway, you haven't answered my question. How are things in Paris?"

"I thought they were all right," answered Bethancourt. "It's just that Marla wants me to spend more time there than I can." He sighed. "I don't really want to live in Paris, and unfortunately I've made it quite clear that I don't consider it my main residence."

Kendrick raised an eyebrow. "You told her that?"

"I don't have to." Bethancourt pointed to Cerberus, who was nos-

ing along the edge of the stream. "I haven't taken him to France. Once I do, it will take a six month quarantine to get him back into England. So long as I leave him here, it's perfectly clear where I expect to spend the majority of my time."

"Of course," murmured Kendrick. "I hadn't thought." He cast his line again, watching it play out with a judicious eye. "Well, they say compromise is everything. Maybe you can work one out."

"Did you try compromise?" asked Bethancourt.

"With Dorrie?" Kendrick shook his head. "No. I was passionately in love with Dorrie when we got married, but when eventually passion waned, I realized I didn't love her. I was fond of her, but I didn't love her. In some ways I didn't even like her. Not as much, for example, as I like you."

"Surely that's different," protested Bethancourt.

Kendrick shrugged. "Liking is liking," he said. "Ah! I've got another one hooked."

Bethancourt watched with interest while Kendrick landed the fish. He had done some fishing in his youth, but it had never been one of his hobbies and it seemed to take more skill than he remembered.

"That'll do it," said Kendrick, unhooking the fish and laying it in the creel with the others. "Time to get these back to the kitchen."

Bethancourt whistled for his dog as they started up the hill. "It's going to be a long night," he said. "Everyone's already got cabin fever, and there's nowhere to go."

"Then everyone will get drunk

at dinner," said Kendrick. "That's what they mostly do when they're holed up somewhere. For myself, I think I'll ask Vera to spend the evening with me in my room. It sounds as if she'll be bored enough to say yes."

"She might say yes even if she weren't bored," said Bethancourt, repressing the chill Kendrick's plans raised in him.

"She might," agreed Kendrick. "In any case it'll be a pleasant way to pass the time."

"Not for me," said Bethancourt ruefully. "I'll be lucky if I'm not tossed out."

These words turned out to be prophetic. Marla came down to dinner but was clearly unwell and retreated again after a few bites of trout. Bethancourt, having uneasily watched Kendrick and Vera adjourn to the bedroom, followed Marla upstairs with a hot toddy as an offering, only to discover that she had abandoned the denial phase of her illness and admitted to herself that she had the flu. With this admission came the realization that it was Bethancourt who had given it to her, and she was correspondingly furious with him. Sympathetic to her plight, he let her hurl abuse at him until she wore herself out and then left as requested. Despite the vehemence of her desire never to set eyes on him again, he thought he could probably slip into bed later when she was asleep.

He paused on his way back downstairs to listen guiltily at Kendrick's door, though it seemed ridiculous to suppose that even a serial killer would murder a woman in his own

bedroom. At first he could hear nothing, but then at last he caught the reassuring sounds of their voices. He was just stepping away when he realized he was not alone in the hallway and raised his eyes to see his other suspect.

Haverford grinned. "I wouldn't knock if I were you," he said. "Spencer's got Vera in there with him."

"I thought he might," said Bethancourt, trying to look innocent. "It's why I hesitated."

Haverford looked wistful. "Not a bad idea," he said. "God knows there is nothing else to do here."

"Not an option for me," said Bethancourt.

"How's she doing?"

"She's pretty sick. I don't know how she's going to work tomorrow."

Haverford shrugged. "Minnie'll manage," he said, referring to the makeup woman. "It's amazing what she can do."

How Marla looked was not Bethancourt's primary concern, but he nodded agreement.

"I'm going down for a drink," he said. "Want to come?"

"All right," said Haverford, turning back to accompany him. "It's better than sitting in my room, which is what I've been doing all day. I hope to God the rain stops tomorrow."

Back in the pub, Emily had come up with a CD player and was dancing with the hairstylist. Lydia and Amy, the other two models, were perforce dancing with each other, but they welcomed male partners in the form of Bethancourt and Haverford eagerly. The rest of the clientele, mostly vacationing fishermen,

watched with an odd mixture of disgruntlement at having their hide-away turned into a dancehall and appreciation of the models' beauty. One or two eventually joined the party, but this still left a preponderance of women, and Bethancourt had to be quite firm about sitting down and getting himself a drink.

As he settled down to watch the others, he felt happier than he had all day. Here were all the girls at risk as well as one murder suspect nicely under his eye, and he was fairly certain nothing untoward was taking place in Kendrick's bedroom. He realized then why he had been so edgy all day despite his not really thinking that either Kendrick or Haverford was a murderer. It was because he was terrified that he was wrong about Kendrick and because he would never forgive himself if one of these women died as a result.

"I've got the wind up over nothing," he muttered to himself and went to ring Gibbons from the public call box in the hall.

Gibbons was tired and rather grumpy.

"Sergeant Peters and I have been at it all day," he said. "If there's a connection between these murders, I can't find it. Neither can Dancy. And although Dr. Baines thinks our killer must have known Sandy Boyd, Dancy isn't taking that on faith. He says if it is a serial killer, it could be anyone."

"I suppose he's right," said Bethancourt.

Gibbons groaned. "Don't say that. Do you know what he's got me doing now? He's got me interviewing

every single man on the Purple Pansy's membership list and then running round to check their alibis, always assuming they have one. He was also quite fierce because I had simply taken your word that you had the flu and didn't go out."

"I'm sorry," said Bethancourt. "But I really can't prove I was home sick. Particularly not at two A.M."

"Nobody can," replied Gibbons gloomily. "Nearly everyone I've talked to claims to have been asleep. What else does Dancy expect?"

"He thinks it is a serial killer, then?"

"He's keeping all his options open. How are things up there?"

"All serene," answered Bethancourt. "You will ring me, won't you, if anything breaks? I haven't seen the least sign that Spencer or Dom wants to murder anybody, but it's a bit nerve-racking all the same."

"You don't know what nerve-racking is," retorted Gibbons. "Dr. Baines says if it is a serial killer our man will murder again very soon. In fact, she's surprised that another body hasn't turned up already. It's not a soothing thought, I can tell you."

"No, I don't suppose it is."

"Nothing like a bit of pressure in one's work," continued Gibbons. "Look, Phillip, I've got to catch what sleep I can. I'll see you when you get back."

"Right you are. Goodnight, Jack."

In the bar the party was still going on, and Bethancourt was immediately summoned to dance when he returned. Kendrick had been right—they were all getting quite drunk.

It was much later when Haverford came to sit beside Bethancourt on the settle. "Taking a break, are you?" he asked, his speech a bit thick. "Think I'd better join you. I'm worn out."

"I think we're all in the same state," answered Bethancourt. He lit a cigarette and surveyed the room. Amy and the hairstylist were still circling on the floor but without much spirit. The others were similarly collapsed in chairs except for Emily, who had retired more than an hour ago.

Bethancourt felt a pressure on his shoulder and turned to see Haverford leaning against him, eyes closed and breathing heavily.

"Dom," he said, catching hold of his arm. Haverford blinked. "Dom, don't you think you ought to go up?"

"Wha—? Oh. Guess so," he mumbled.

But Haverford appeared to be in that state of inebriation where the ambulatory powers have abandoned the unequal struggle with alcohol. He made an effort to rise but fell back almost at once. A puzzled look came over his face.

"Oh dear," he said.

"That's all right, old man," said Bethancourt, stubbing out his cigarette. "You come along with me. Cerberus, stay."

With Haverford's arm over his shoulders, he managed to get him upright and walked him across the room. The stairs were a bit tricky, but with Bethancourt on one side and the banister on the other, Haverford managed it.

"I'm going to feel like hell tomorrow," he said as they turned into his

room. He fell onto the bed rather abruptly. "Thanks, Phillip."

Bethancourt pulled off his shoes and left him to sleep it off. He met the others on the stairs when he emerged, all headed for bed.

"The landlord's kicked us out," said Amy with a laugh. "I think it's past his bedtime."

"Then I'd better get back," said Bethancourt. "I left Cerberus down there."

The landlord was glaring at the borzoi when Bethancourt arrived.

"He won't move," he said indignantly. "I was going to push him out after you, but he won't stir a foot."

"Sorry," said Bethancourt. "I told him to stay. Cerberus, come, lad."

Immediately the dog rose and padded toward his owner.

"Huh!" said the landlord. "Well, you've got him well trained, I can see that. Goodnight, then, sir."

"What about the outside door?" asked Bethancourt. "I need to take him out before I turn in."

"Oh, right." He eyed Bethancourt closely and apparently decided that this guest was sober enough to be trusted. "Well, I'm for bed this minute, but I can give you a key if you'll promise to lock up again."

"I won't forget."

Outside the rain had stopped, and the air was cool and clean. Bethancourt felt invigorated by it. He had intended to just let the dog relieve himself and go back in but instead found himself walking down the narrow road admiring the moonlight gleaming in the puddles. It was infinitely refreshing after a dull day and a long evening in the stale atmosphere of the pub.

"Poor Marla," he said to Cerberus. "It looks like she'll have to work tomorrow after all, and she's really not up to it. Come on, then, we'd best be getting back."

They had come almost a mile, and Bethancourt was tired when at last they reached the inn. No light shone out from the building, and he fumbled with the key in the dark but at last managed to get the door open. He closed and locked it carefully behind him and felt his way towards the stairs, down which a dim light shone. Cerberus was waiting for him at the top.

"Come on, lad," he said and was just starting down the hall when he was stopped by a sharp rapping sound from inside the w.c. and a voice calling, "Hallo?"

Bethancourt was startled but not alarmed. He stepped over to the door. "Yes? Who is it?"

"Spencer," came the voice. "Is that you, Phillip?"

"Yes," answered Bethancourt, rather bewildered. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm locked in," said Kendrick. "The key's not out there, is it?"

"No," said Bethancourt, trying the door, which was indeed locked.

"But it's only a skeleton lock. I'll fetch the key from the loo down the hall—it should work well enough."

"Thanks."

He found the second key in the lock of the w.c. at the opposite end of the hall and started back, still puzzling over the strange circumstance. If the key had disappeared, how had Kendrick come to be locked in? It seemed a pointless thing for anyone to have done; moreover, ev-

eryone appeared to have retired for the night. Certainly the hallway was silent, and no light shone from beneath any of the doors.

And then, just as he was approaching the w.c. in which Kendrick was imprisoned, another explanation occurred to him that raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Being locked in the w.c. might not be ironclad, but it was also the only sort of alibi available in the circumstances.

As he unlocked the door, a voice inside him told him he was overwrought and making a fool of himself. He hadn't even heard Kendrick's story yet, and here he was assuming his friend was freshly come from a murder. Another part of his mind informed him that if he were right the missing key would be concealed either in the w.c. or on Kendrick's person.

"Thanks very much," said Kendrick, emerging from the loo in his dressing gown. It was of flannel, with patch pockets that appeared undistorted by any contents whatsoever.

"But whatever happened?" asked Bethancourt.

Kendrick ran a hand over his hair. "I must have been dreaming," he said. "I could have sworn I heard someone knocking, but when I got up, no one was there. So I went to the loo."

"But how did you get locked in?"

"Haven't the foggiest," said Kendrick. "I didn't bother locking the door, not thinking anybody was about, but when I tried to get out, I couldn't. I'm damned glad you came along when you did—I didn't fancy

spending the rest of the night in there, and I'd just about decided I'd have to."

"Glad to be of help," said Bethancourt. "Look, do you mind waiting while I use the toilet? I don't want the same thing to happen to me."

Kendrick looked perplexed as well he might, since Bethancourt not only had the key but the use of the second w.c. But he agreed without objecting.

"I'll only be a minute."

He closed the door behind him and went straight to the toilet. There were not many hiding places in a water closet, but he could think of one obvious one. He lifted the lid of the tank quietly and peered into the water. It was easy to see the key lying on the bottom.

Bethancourt stood staring down at it, and a cold fist closed over his heart. Numbly he flushed the toilet for verisimilitude and turned to leave. It had been stupid, he realized now, not to check on the models before he let Kendrick out. He would have to think of some way to enter Kendrick's room with him to make sure Vera was safe.

He found he could not meet Kendrick's eyes when he emerged. He had been worried and ashamed when Kendrick's guilt had been a nebulous thing, but now that it was sure, he was terrified. It was all he could do to walk down the hall at his side, responding automatically to Kendrick's commonplaces, all the time frantic about Vera.

This problem was solved when Kendrick said goodnight and attempted to enter his room, only to find the door locked.

"Christ," he said, nonplussed. "If this whole thing is Vera's idea of a joke, I'll never forgive her."

"Knock her up," suggested Bethancourt, all his nerves on edge.

Cerberus had picked up on his master's mood and was standing alertly, clearly puzzled about where the threat was coming from.

Kendrick knocked sharply and called, "Vera! Let me in. It's Spencer. Vera!"

There was no response.

"She's there," said Kendrick, annoyed. "I heard the bedsprings creak. Vera!" He rattled the door-knob impotently.

A sick feeling was growing in the pit of Bethancourt's stomach. He stood helplessly beside Kendrick until all at once the solution occurred to him. "I know where the landlord keeps the spare keys," he said. "I'll be right back."

Released at last to action, he raced down the stairs with Cerberus at his heels. Swinging himself off the staircase, he made for the kitchen door in the back hall. On the wall behind it was the board where all the keys hung neatly on hooks; Bethancourt had seen it earlier when the landlord had fetched him the front door key. He grabbed the spare for Number 4 and ran back.

Kendrick was beginning to look worried when Bethancourt returned. "There's something wrong," he announced. "I heard a noise from inside, but Vera hasn't said a word. Even if she's been having me on, the joke's over now—why wouldn't she answer?"

"We'll see," said Bethancourt, pushing past him to jam the key in-

to the lock with trembling hands, turning it and shoving the door open in the same motion.

"Jesus!" exclaimed Kendrick hoarsely.

The bedside lamp was on, throwing a pool of light over the woman lying limply in the bed, blankets and sheets all tangled and askew. Even in the yellow light her face had a bluish cast, and she did not appear to be breathing. The window was wide open, drapes fluttering in the cold wind that blew through the room.

Bethancourt was already beside the bed, reaching for Vera's wrist.

"She's still warm," he said. "I thought I felt a pulse for a moment—does anyone know CPR?"

"Yes," said Kendrick, still in the doorway behind him. He made an obvious effort to pull himself together and came into the room. "I do. Help me get her off the bed."

This arrangement was hardly to Bethancourt's liking, but it seemed the only hope. They stretched her out on the floor, and Kendrick went to work while Bethancourt moved over to the phone and rang for an ambulance and the police. He kept one eye on Kendrick as he talked, but the man seemed in earnest, working desperately to breathe life back into Vera's body. And then Bethancourt's gaze fell on the key lying on the bedside table beside the telephone, identical to the one he had just left in the door lock. For a moment, its significance did not register, and then his mind catapulted forward.

If Kendrick had strangled Vera and then locked himself in the loo,

how could he have locked the door of his room and still left the key inside? For that matter, why had he not finished the job and arranged the body as the killer had with Abbie Waite? It made no sense unless the killer had been interrupted by Kendrick's attempts to get in. Unless the killer had been not Kendrick but Haverford.

The pieces fell instantly into place. Haverford, taking his chance and knocking on Kendrick's door. If Kendrick had simply closed it again and gone back to bed, nothing would have happened, but instead Kendrick, like many people awakened in the night, had gone to relieve himself. Haverford's room was opposite the w.c., and once he heard Kendrick inside, he would only have to use the other skeleton key to lock his employer in, having hidden the original in the toilet tank where an innocent Kendrick would never think to look for it. It had been an elaborate plan to frame Kendrick, and it would have worked beautifully had Bethancourt not taken his dog for an hour's walk.

The 999 operator had rung off, and Bethancourt, his brain awl, was listening to a dial-tone. He replaced the receiver and went to the open window. He leaned out, wondering how, if he was right, anyone could escape from an upper floor window, but the answer was below. This room faced the back of the inn, and the window stood directly above a little enclosed porch around the back door. It would not have been a straight drop to the ground.

He could see nothing else and returned to the telephone, dialing

Gibbons' number. The voice that answered was blurred with sleep.

"It's Dom Haverford," Bethancourt told him, "but he's got away. He nearly killed Vera Johns—hell, maybe he has killed her, we're not sure. I've rung the Scottish police, and you had better do the same."

"But what happened?" demanded Gibbons. "You said earlier everything was fine."

"I can't explain now," said Bethancourt distractedly. "There's too much to do." He rang off and turned to Kendrick, who was pressing rhythmically down on Vera's chest. "I'll be back," he said. "I've got to open the front door for the police."

Kendrick merely grunted in reply.

"Cerberus, stay," ordered Bethancourt. He did not know if Haverford could have reentered the inn, or would even have tried to, but Kendrick was far too busy to keep an eye out. All the same, he missed the big dog's presence as he descended the shadowy staircase and unlocked the front door. He stood for a moment in the darkened hallway, wondering suddenly if there was a killer just outside, waiting to creep in when he turned his back. Then he shook his head, banishing the fantasy, and returned upstairs.

Kendrick, on his knees beside Vera, was breathing heavily.

"You're going to have to spell me, Phillip," he said. "I can't keep it up much longer."

"All right." Bethancourt steeled himself; he was squeamish at the best of times. "What do I do?"

"Watch for a moment first."

But with Kendrick's next effort,

Vera drew a long, racking breath and then another. Kendrick laid a finger along her bruised throat.

"There's a definite pulse now," he said, "but it's very uneven."

"But she's alive."

"For the moment." Kendrick raised a haggard face. "It's freezing in here," he said. "We have to keep her warm."

"We can't close the window," said Bethancourt apologetically. "There are bound to be fingerprints. But here."

He rose and flicked on all three bars of the electric fire and then pulled the blankets off the bed. They tucked them round her and then sat on the floor beside her, watching her shallow breaths and waiting for help to come.

It was not much longer, though it seemed an eternity, before the paramedics arrived and relieved them of their burden, bustling round efficiently, tense but quick and utterly sure of what they were doing. Bethancourt had never felt so grateful in his life.

The two policemen who accompanied them, however, took a dim view of Bethancourt's story. They shepherded him and Kendrick into the lounge and proceeded to make it clear that there had been nothing to prevent either Bethancourt or Kendrick from having strangled Vera. Moreover, they seemed to think Bethancourt just as likely a suspect as anyone. Bethancourt, exhausted and weak with relief, had great difficulty preventing himself from bursting into what would no doubt have been rather hysterical laughter.

But with the first faint glimmering of light in the sky, the C.I.D. officers arrived and took charge. They did not discount the uniformed men's theories, but they did investigate the other possibilities. It was they who found Haverford at the back of the inn with a broken ankle.

As the sun rose above the hills, Bethancourt and Kendrick were left alone together in the lounge. They stared blankly at each other for a long moment with tired, drawn faces. Then Kendrick rubbed fretfully at the stubble on his cheeks and said, "How could I not have known, Phillip? He was with me for nearly three years."

Bethancourt looked at the man who was his friend and whom, less than a month ago, he would have said he knew well and yet had suspected of murder.

"I never noticed," he said, "that you were particular friends."

"Well, no," admitted Kendrick. "He was a very quiet sort, and I suppose I didn't do much to draw him out. He kept to himself, and I guess I was happy enough to let him."

"I hardly think," said Bethancourt, tapping his cigarette meditatively on the edge of the ashtray, "that you could have solved Dom's problems by making an effort to draw him out."

"No, but I still feel rotten that I didn't try," Kendrick shook his head. "How long have you known it was him? I rather thought," he added, "that you came because of me."

"I came because of Marla," corrected Bethancourt. "I had no idea Dom was the killer. As for you—" He paused and ran his hand

through his hair. "I never really believed it was you, but if I were wrong, I kept wondering how I couldn't have known and what I might have done."

"Like me with Dom," Kendrick's lips twisted with an ironic smile.

"Except that Dom is guilty. A rather important distinction." Bethancourt crushed out his cigarette. "I don't know if not trusting you absolutely is a forgivable offense," he said awkwardly.

Kendrick's eyes widened. "It's not an offense at all," he said. "I was never upset with you, Phillip. I thought you knew that."

Bethancourt grinned crookedly. "Thank you for that. Now I just have to forgive myself."

"Actually," said Kendrick, leaning back in his chair, "all this has shown me a new side of you, and I rather admire it. I always knew, of course, what you and Jack did, but I never saw you doing it before."

It was the last thing Bethancourt had expected to hear.

"But we weren't clever at all about this case," he protested.

Kendrick shrugged. "Maybe not," he said, "but it wasn't that I was thinking of. It never occurred to me before how much of what you do involves digging into the dark sides of people's natures. You face it better than I should."

"To each his own," said Bethancourt. "I shouldn't deal at all well with your kind of work."

"God, work!" exclaimed Kendrick, struck by an association of ideas. "Bloody hell, I hope that wasn't what set this all off." He looked deeply troubled.

"What?" asked Bethancourt.

"It was two or three months ago," said Kendrick. "Dom came to me with some photographs he'd taken and asked me to look at them. That wasn't unusual, and I critiqued them for him as I always did. Then he asked me if I thought he was close to being ready to go it on his own, and I had to say no."

"Why?" asked Bethancourt. "Wasn't he any good?"

"He was all right with set pieces, although he mucked up his lighting a bit. But he just hadn't the knack of catching a pose, and if he hadn't learned it in three years, he was never going to. I told him frankly that I thought he could make his living as a photographer but not as a fashion photographer. I didn't want him to think I was just trying to keep a good assistant, so I arranged for Meredith from *Vogue* to look at his stuff"

"I take it she said the same thing?"

Kendrick looked surprised. "Of course. I may have my faults, but I know my business."

"And how did he take it?"

"He was disappointed, of course, but I thought he was all right. He came to me a few days later and said he'd have to do some thinking about his next step and he'd like to stay on with me meanwhile. Naturally I was pleased. It's a nightmare breaking in a new assistant." He spread his hands as if in appeal. "What else should I have done?"

"Nothing," said Bethancourt firmly. "It may have nothing to do with what drove him over the edge, and even if it did, there was nothing

you could have done. You aren't responsible for the twisted workings of a psychopathic mind. It's just your misfortune that he happened into your life."

They were interrupted by Emily, who came into the lounge with a heavy step. Both she and Amy had been awakened by the arrival of the paramedics but had, until now, been carefully kept apart from the two men the police had considered suspects. "Is there coffee?" she asked, dropping into a chair.

"Yes," answered Bethancourt, "but it's cold."

Emily groaned. "God, this is awful," she said. "Dom, of all people. He always seemed so, so—hell, I don't know any more what he seemed. Not like a killer anyway."

"No," agreed Kendrick with feeling.

"The only bright light," said Emily, glancing at her watch, "is that it's too early to ring the magazine yet. I don't know what I'm going to tell them. And we lost a whole day yesterday, too."

"Maybe we could get something done this afternoon, after the police are finished with us," said Kendrick.

"That's good of you, Spence," said Emily warmly. "Although we've got little enough to work with. You with no assistant, me with one model in hospital and another down with the flu. How is Marla, Phillip? Do you think she can work?"

"Good Lord," said Bethancourt, jumping up. "I'd forgotten her. I'd better go check."

He hurried out of the room.

They were not destined to work

that afternoon, which was just as well, since Marla was running a temperature of a hundred and two. She had to be interviewed by the police from her bed, which did not improve her temper, and Bethancourt got the distinct feeling that if she weren't feeling so poorly there would be murder done on this trip yet and he would be the victim.

In the afternoon, just as Emily and Kendrick were preparing to try to shoot some pictures, Gibbons arrived with a delegation from England, and they all had to tell their stories again.

"No wonder you look so tired," he said to Bethancourt, whose statement he had taken last. "Have you had any sleep?"

"No," answered Bethancourt.

"Well, try to keep it all clear in your head. If it comes to trial, you'll no doubt be called as a witness."

Bethancourt nodded. He had appeared in court in one or two other cases and he always hated it, but there was nothing to be done about that. "Do you think it *will* come to trial?" he asked. "Has Dom said anything yet?"

"Yes," said Gibbons with satisfaction. "He claimed to be innocent at first, I gather, but they kept at him and I guess they finally hit the right note because just before I arrived it all came out. He's been spouting out his hatred of the entire fashion industry all afternoon." He flipped over the pages of his notebook. "This story that Spencer told you—about dashing Dom's hopes of becoming a fashion photographer—was probably the catalyst."

"Well, don't tell Spencer that,"

said Bethancourt. "He feels bad enough as it is."

"No," agreed Gibbons. "I was just working out my own theory. Well, partly mine and partly Dr. Baines's. We think Spencer was everything that Dom wanted to be: very successful, much sought-after, sure of himself, and, perhaps most important, attractive to women. It's no secret that half the models Spencer dates ask him out rather than the other way around. So for three years Dom watches while beautiful women buzz round Spencer like bees round a honey jar. And in Dom's mind, all he has to do to have all this for himself is work hard at his photography. Then Spencer tells him it's not true."

"That seems to me a good motive for killing Spencer, not models."

"Yes, but don't you see that it's the models who having been turning him down for three years. He could take that while he secretly knew that one day they'd be begging to be his lovers, but after that dream was gone?"

"So you think," said Bethancourt slowly, "that when Sandy Boyd—who was really nobody at all—turned him down, he went over the edge, strangling her in a fit of rage. And once he'd killed her, he found he had finally achieved power over the women who had always looked down on him."

"Exactly," said Gibbons, closing his notebook.

Bethancourt tried to think about this and found he couldn't. "Well, at least you've got him," he said. "Are you taking him back tonight?"

"I meant to," answered Gibbons,

"but apparently all the paperwork hasn't come through yet. The Scottish police are being very cooperative, but they're understandably worried about the cocaine."

"Cocaine?" asked Bethancourt, confused. "What cocaine?"

"The eight grams of it they found in Dom's room," replied Gibbons. "Didn't you know?"

"No," said Bethancourt, "but I should have guessed. He took me in completely with his drunken act, but that was partly because I'd seen him drinking heavily earlier. But of course, if he was also taking cocaine, he could drink that much and still easily be able to function."

"Just so," agreed Gibbons. "Well, I've got to ring the Yard and report progress. There's not much more for me to do, though, until the Scottish authorities release Dom. Do you want to have dinner later?"

"Unless Marla wants me, yes. In fact, I'll go check on her now while you're making your call."

Marla was awake, but drowsy. She was still peeved with him, but

she had tired of telling him that she wouldn't be sick if he hadn't demanded that she come nurse him in London, especially since his response was to admit full responsibility and apologize.

"You should eat something," said Bethancourt, brushing the hair out of her eyes. "Could you stand some soup?"

"I suppose so," she said grudgingly. She sighed. "I expect I'd better have something if I have to get up and work tomorrow. How's Vera?"

"Better, but she won't be out of hospital for a couple of days yet."

Marla sighed again.

"Jack says he won't bother you while you're ill," continued Bethancourt. "He says he can talk to you later, when we get back to London."

"Jack?" said Marla sharply. "Jack's here?"

"He's come to take Dom back," answered Bethancourt.

"Oh Lord," groaned Marla, turning her face into the pillow as if hiding from the world. "This has got to be the most awful shoot I've ever been on."

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the January issue.

It began as a quiet Sunday morning at the headquarters of the Boston Police Department. The moment Lieutenant Tennent made his appearance Chief Janke asked him, "What do you know about Maxie 'Big Man' Manusco?"

"Not much," admitted Tennent, "except that he's the reputed kingpin of crime in our town. No convictions because witnesses refuse to testify, or they simply vanish." He added, "Why ask me? I'm strictly Homicide."

"He's all yours now," said Janke. "Somebody murdered him in his mansion out near Spot Pond last night. Small caliber weapon, powder burns on his shirtfront."

"Fill me in," urged Tennent, suddenly alert.

"His maid—a Swedish woman—discovered the body and telephoned Headquarters at oh-seven twenty-three. I went out there. The body was sprawled on the library floor; he had been dead maybe six hours. No sign of the gun anywhere. The maid, butler, cook, and chauffeur all claim they were in their quarters in a far wing and don't know exactly what happened."

"Anything else?"

"The old man had no children. At various times last week he was visited by each of his six nieces, children of his sisters, with their husbands.

"Each couple came on a different day of the week; the first arrived on Monday. They each drove a different make of car. According to Audie Ditter, his bookkeeper, 'Big Man' Manusco had recently expanded his operations to Miami, Nashville, Omaha, Philadelphia, Queens, and Raleigh, putting the husband of one of his nieces in charge of each. A 'family affair,' you might say—none of it legit, you can bet.

"The nieces are named Angelina, Beatrice, Claudia, Diana, Eleanora, and Felicia. Their husbands' names, not necessarily in order, are Arturo, Benedict, Constantine, Dominic, Emilio, and Federico. Their last names—again, I'm not sure in what order—are Santino, Torricelli, Utrillo, Vittorio, Wittali, and Xavier."

"So, you suspect one of the nieces or a husband?"

"One of them or some underworld rival. You're in charge of this case. Go see what you can dig up."

Lieutenant Tennent began by interviewing Audie Ditter, the book-

keeper, an owlish little man with a nervous habit of continually readjusting his thick-lensed glasses, and two of the servants: the aged butler, Sylvester Coatsworth, and the Swedish maid, Helga Helmuth. In answer to his questions, the following statements were made:

(1) The bookkeeper declared, "His niece Beatrice and her husband arrived the day after the couple in the Dodge and the day before the couple from Queens."

(2) The butler said, "Arturo, Benedict, and Constantine are married, in some order, to Diana, the niece from Raleigh, and the one who arrived Monday (who did not come in the Dodge)."

(3) The maid said, "The niece who arrived in the new Chrysler came the day after Felicia and the day before Arturo's wife."

(4) The butler spoke again: "Mr. Vittorio came sometime later in the week than Emilio but sometime before the young gentleman from Miami."

The maid added, "Those three drove the Jaguar, the Chrysler, and the Lincoln."

(5) Mr. Ditter, the bookkeeper, adjusted his glasses once more and said, "Mr. Santino arrived the day before the man driving the Jaguar."

(6) Mr. Coatsworth, the butler, then stated, "For your information, sir, Claudia is not the wife of Benedict, Mr. Xavier, or the young gentleman who owns the Buick. None of the four came from Omaha or arrived on Tuesday."

The lieutenant scanned his notes. "Let's get to the murder. What happened last night? Did any of you witness the shooting?"

(7) The butler and the maid exchanged glances. The former replied, "Mr. Ditter had been here, settling some family business matters, I presume. He departed in the late afternoon. Ms. Helmuth and I and the other two servants retired to our respective rooms in the east wing.

"By the way, last week Eleanora came after the niece from Nashville and before Dominic's wife. They include Mrs. Santino, Mrs. Utrillo, and Mrs. Xavier. No two arrived on successive days.

"Around midnight I was awakened by loud voices downstairs. The master was having a heated discussion with one of those three nieces."

"Which one?" asked Tennent.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but I—I'd rather not be specific. My position here is rather delicate, you might say. I will only confirm that it was one of the three I just mentioned."

"Didn't you investigate?"

"That, sir, replied the old man stiffly, "is not the sort of thing a proper butler does."

"But you heard the shot, didn't you?"

"It *may* have been a shot, sir."

(8) Helga Helmuth said, "You must understand, lieutenant, this is not exactly a typical American household. Mr. Coatsworth and I are frightened to accuse any of the nieces, having experienced their fiery tempers. But I will volunteer this:

"Last week Federico's wife came two days after Mrs. Torricelli and the day before the niece who came in the BMW. They include, as you may know, Angelina, Beatrice, and Claudia.

"I will state at this time that it was one of those three who returned last night and had the violent argument with the master. Whether she is the person who shot him, that I do not know."

Lieutenant Tennent then knew the identity of the niece who was heard arguing with her uncle just before he was shot. A nitrate test on her hands proved she was guilty.

Which niece shot Maxie "Big Man" Manusco?

.....

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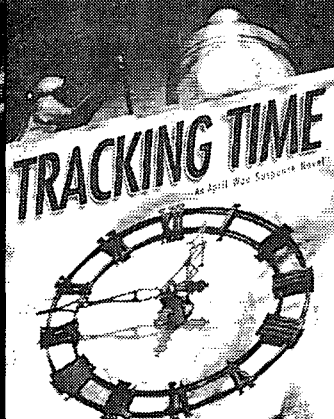
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4	Andrew Garson	Friday
3	Donald Ibsen	Monday
2	Carl Farley	Wednesday
1	Brad Jaeger	Thursday

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FICTION

THE GHOST IN THE OLD GREEN SHOE

Dan Crawford

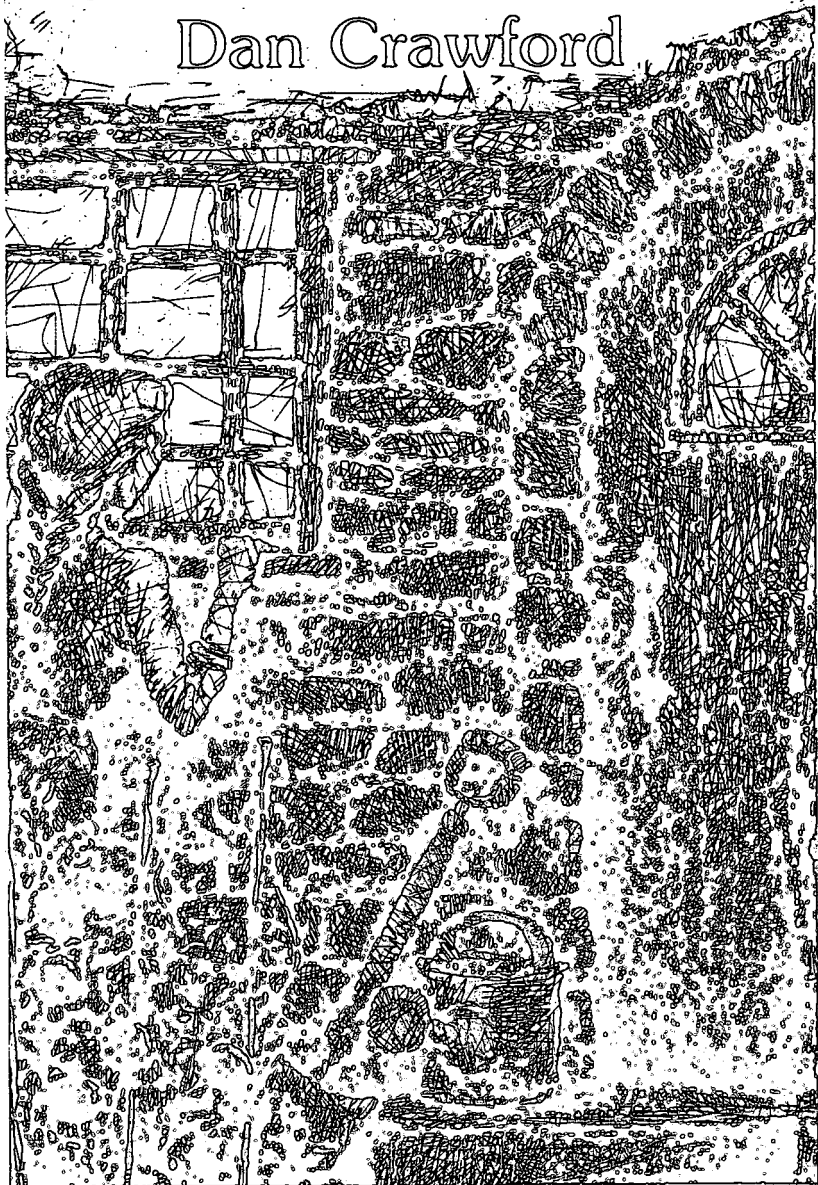


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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/00

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“More potatoes?”
“Thank you. Where did everyone go?”
“Home, I guess.”

To a point it had been Polijn's idea of a perfect evening. The crowd at The Old Green Shoe had been modest in size but immense in volume. She had been cheered and lauded after every single song, even when she sidestepped every request to render the rollicking one that gave the inn its name. The tale of the lady who left a banquet wearing glossy red shoes and returned in one red one and one old green one, and her attempts to talk her way out of that, was one of Polijn's better numbers. But you never sang a local favorite until you learned which version the locals favored. Changing a single adjective could make the difference between “That's beautiful” and “That's not the way we do it around here.”

“Bacon?”

“I wondered if that's what it was. Some of them might have gone over to Chener's place.”

“Nonsense. The food's terrible. *She* doesn't know how to spread a table.”

Polijn had been planning her program for supper; she would, of course, be expected to sing while the guests ate. And Vytty didn't seem to be cooking any lavish amounts of anything, so there'd be precious little left later on. It was the one time she envied harpists, who could play and chew at the same time. You could hardly do justice to buttered parsnips while you were playing a flute.

But as the sky outside the window darkened, and the smell of supper cooking began to drift through the room, customers began to drift out the door. Gela tried to keep his patrons in their seats, promising the freshest butter and the oldest wine in town. He made other promises in a low voice, pointing to Polijn in a way that made the young minstrel a bit uneasy. When the food was served, though, Polijn found herself seated at a small table with no one but the innkeeper, his wife, and his brother Theid. What had seemed a small amount of bacon and root vegetables for the crowd was more than ample for four.

“Pack of fools,” Gela growled, stabbing at his carrots. “She never comes out till the common room's empty.”

“Well, now.” Theid reached for the bacon a fifth time. “She's scared them enough one at a time that they don't want to risk it.”

Vytty caught the shift in Polijn's eyes, toward the empty benches in the big room. “Fine thing to be talking about, with a minstrel around,” said the innkeeper's wife. “She'll spread the news east and west.”

Polijn opened her mouth to reply, but Gela grunted, “Think it matters? Everybody within riding distance knows all about it by now.”

“Say, now.” Theid looked up from his plate for only the third time. “Maybe you can help us put her down.”

A belief in the arcane powers of minstrels had gotten Polijn into far too many interesting situations. She was reasonably sure she wouldn't en-

joy tangling with whatever had frightened all those people, some of whom had not looked the least like nervous types. But she hardly liked to turn her hosts down flat before they told her the problem (and before the peaches in that bowl had been served). So, assuming an expression of great optimism, she said, "Her? Who is she? And what does she do?"

"Mischief," said Gela. "Plucked all the chickens one night. Half of them died of the cold."

Theid shrugged. "She usually isn't that busy. Mostly it's just plates and the cutlery."

Vytty thumped a fist on the table, bouncing her mug an inch into the air. "And you call that 'just'? There's just one of the good spoons she hasn't bent double, and you never know until you've drawn the beer where she's poked a hole in your cup!"

Polijn had heard similar stories. "Is it a—"

"It's a ghost, is what it is." Theid reached for the butter and yet another slice of bread. "And a busy one, at that." He started to lean back in his chair but sat forward again. "Forgot. This the one she broke the leg on?"

"People wait up nights to stop her," Gela told Polijn, shaking his head. "Everyone's been gone by morning."

Polijn licked her lips. "Disappeared?"

He shrugged. "In a manner of speaking. In general, they come around the next afternoon, saying just when they saw the ghost they remembered they'd promised to paint the barn or some such. Nobody lasts past the first good scream."

"I did," Theid objected.

"Only because it took two screams to wake you up," snapped his sister-in-law.

This was not fitting into the stories Polijn knew. "It sounds more like a hobgoblin. Are you sure it's a—"

"It's that filthy Ashena!" Vytty thumped the table again. "Two years ago she went off in the night, and the next night this all started!" She shook her knife at the walls of the common room. Now that Polijn looked, there were large smudges in several places as though something had been hurled against the wood.

"Ran off with the wrong man, I guess," said Gela, studying a carrot at the end of his knife. "Greasy little slut. I warned her." Polijn was sure he had. She'd felt his eyes trying to bore through her trousers several times in the course of the evening.

"Greedy, too," sniffed Vytty. "Never seemed to get enough to eat."

Polijn could believe that as well, from the increasingly dark looks Vytty had been casting toward her brother-in-law. Theid had avoided everything else on the table in favor of the bacon and the white bread, fare that was probably not offered a hired hand regularly.

"As to that," Theid noted, "I thought she was pleasant enough. Active for my tastes, always darting around the room and coming out from be-

hind things when you least expected it." A placid creature, unlikely ever to be called active, Theid was far too thick-skinned to be injured by his sister-in-law's glances.

Gela had caught them, however, and slid the potatoes closer to his brother. Noticing this, Theid said, "I get enough of those while I'm weeding them. I'd take the bread, though."

Vytty's teeth were clenched, but she didn't want to object in front of a minstrel. She shoved the bread over to him, and went on, "We lost enough money while she was here. I expect she and her sweetheart went off with everything she'd had from the till, and then he decided not to share."

Perhaps, thought Polijn, it was a ghost, just trying to teach these people to stop slandering her. It could all be true, of course; a ghost could be just as irritated by the truth as a human being.

"I can stay in the common room tonight," she said as if it were something she did every night and twice on holidays. "If nothing else, I can talk to your ghost and find out what she means by it all."

"Well, I . . . suppose that would be a great favor." Gela didn't sound convinced. Either he had no faith in her ability to hold her ground, or she had correctly guessed what the innkeeper planned to charge her for a night's stay.

"If you're staying in here, you'll want to get some sleep first." Vytty rose, catching up the bread, the bacon, and the bowl of peaches before Theid could make any further inroads on the stock. "It's going to be her time in another hour or so."

"I'll just see that the chickens are locked up for the night." Gela headed for the door.

Theid stretched his legs in front of him, showing no overt interest in any chores that might be waiting. Polijn looked him over and said, "Is there a good place to hide?" She was thinking of Gela, but to spare his family feelings she added, "I'd like to see her before she sees me."

He shrugged. "Seeing her's bad enough even if she doesn't look in your direction." But the problem had engaged his interest, and he let his eyes wander across the big room. "There's space among the kegs you'd probably fit into. Used to hide there herself, though, when Vytty was on one of her rampages. She might think to look."

After the innkeeper's family had retired upstairs, Polijn considered the possibilities in the big dark room. Discarding the fireplace and the tables as feasible sanctuaries, she decided Theid was probably correct. Squeezing in among the beer barrels, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to doze.

At length she was roused by a sigh. Peering from among the kegs, she found a young woman glowing before the hearth. She was about Polijn's height but looked a year or so younger. Her light hair was bound in braids at the back of her head. Her face was pale, but her eyes were bright blue and her lips a flaming red.

She sighed again, looking around the common room. Then with a grunt she got both hands under the big kettle by the hearth and heaved. It flew into the air over her head, left another smudge on the wall it hit, and rolled to the floor, spilling water left and right. Flexing her shoulders as if to ease the muscles, she took up some of the pans that hung next to the hearth and bent the handles over her knee. Properly warmed up now, she caught up all the chairs within reach and tossed them across the room. They clattered among the benches; a repaired leg rattled free and rolled across the floor.

The ghost wiped her forehead and dashed spectral sweat to the floor. Shaking her head, she studied her surroundings with some dissatisfaction. Then, with a cry of "Ah!," she pounced on a supply of candles that rested on a shelf. Polijn watched in fascination as she broke each candle neatly in half, dumping the pieces on the floor. Scratching the side of her neck, the ghost looked over the pile. She made a face and squatted next to the broken candles. She took up each piece, one at a time, and jerked the wick out of each.

Polijn was impressed by the ghost's ingenuity and couldn't feel that this spirit looked like much of a threat. All the same, she clutched her silver flute in one hand and the medallion at her neck in the other, in case she needed supernatural assistance. Then she slipped out from between the kegs and cleared her throat.

"Aha!" Eyes gleaming, the ghost flew at her, but not all in one piece. She screamed as an arm dropped off, blood spurting from the stump. Another scream tore the air as blood spurted again and a leg dropped to the floor. The second leg followed in another spout of blood.

This was all very unpleasant, but the blood was merely ghost blood. And Polijn found it difficult to understand how she could come to harm when one ghostly arm was lying under a table and the other was lost among the broken candles. The head had dropped off by now; the girl couldn't even see to attack her. So Polijn cocked her hips to the right and waited to see how long the ghost would keep this up.

The phantom torso hit the floor at Polijn's feet, making not a sound as it struck the wood. Nothing happened for a second after that. Then the head rolled around three times and rocked forward, coming to a rest with its eyes on its audience. "Well!" it said.

A candle rolled off the pile of useless wax cylinders. Polijn looked up from the head and found two arms pulling themselves toward the torso, followed more slowly by two legs, which had not the assistance of fingers for transportation. She gripped her flute a little tighter.

The body pulled together and rose to its feet. The girl put her head back on her neck and her fists on her hips. "They never last after the third scream," she said. She was pouting a bit. "What are you, stupid or something?"

Polijn sniffed. "I just didn't like to interrupt. Are you Ashena?"

The ghost took a step back. "Now, how did you know that? I didn't think anybody watched long enough to recognize me! Well then, maybe you know I was murdered and my body was hidden. I cannot rest until my bones are given a respectable burial."

"I believe we can do something about that," Polijn told her. "Where are your bones?"

"I can't tell you that." Ashena tipped her chin up a bit. "There are powerful rules in cases like these and procedures to be followed. You must find a perfectly white crow's feather and carry it through the Forest of Flaming Trees to the Wizard at World's End. Then he can gaze into his Enchanted Mirror and find my bones."

Polijn tucked her flute away. "That's all very interesting, but it's a lot of effort just to tidy up an inn I'm never going to visit again." She turned back toward her hiding place among the kegs. "Forget about it."

She felt a hand clutch her sleeve. "No no no!" cried the ghost. "Wait! How can you say that?"

Looking over one shoulder, Polijn informed her, "I can say it in five different accents or sing it in seventeen different keys if it helps you understand. Forget about it."

"Oh, but—" Ashena let go of the sleeve and dropped to spectral knees. "If you don't find my bones, I have to keep on doing this until somebody else as—" she swallowed "—as brave and clever and wonderfully courageous as you are comes along. And I had to work hard enough here while I was alive. It isn't fair that I have to keep on with it now."

"Then tell me where to find your bones."

"But I really can't! It really is—wait." Ashena had been putting her hands in front of her face, probably preparatory to complete breakdown. Now she peeked out between her fingers. Polijn took a step back as mischief slowly lit the dead girl's eyes. "What if . . . I tell you who killed me and you guess where my bones are?"

Polijn yawned again but kept her own eyes on the ghost the whole time. "As long as you don't expect too much. I've had a long day, and if you expect me to catch your killer, too—"

"I don't care about that." Ashena stood up. "I don't say it was quite the thing to do, cutting me up that way. But I was saying how I'd tell everybody . . ." She shrugged. "I wasn't any treasure. Just dig me up so I don't have to do this any more. What if they all get disgusted and move away? I have to keep coming, you know, even if there's nobody to scare and nothing to break."

Polijn woke the next morning at the first creak of a stair and braced herself for trouble. Then she heard a second and third creak and relaxed a little.

"What are *you* doing up so early?"

"Just wondered how the little minstrel did."

"She won't be down there, you fool. She'll be halfway across the county by now."

"What, the two of you up and breakfast not ready?"

"Let's go look, and if she's not there, we can go back to bed while you fix the food."

Vytty told the two men very briefly what she thought of them. Then she stepped down into the common room and shrieked at the sight of Polijn sitting at a table. The two men moved up behind her, open-mouthed.

Well, she had their undivided attention. Polijn rose with as much of a matriarchal air as she could assume. She let her eyes move up and down her hosts for a moment before announcing, in a voice devoid of emotion or judgment, "I have learned where she went and what she wants from you."

Vytty licked thick lips. "I hope you didn't credit everything the creature said about us."

Polijn strode to the kitchen, the others following. "Her story is not unlike that in the song of King Birulph and the Gold Plate of Ozeli. She has died and cannot cease until her bones are put to rest."

"So the little viper wants us to find her bones now!" exclaimed Vytty, throwing her hands in the air.

"I'll do it," said her husband. "Anything to have the common room to ourselves again."

"She didn't get far," Polijn promised, moving out through the kitchen door. "Bring a shovel."

Dawn was just a hint of light beyond the back fence as they moved into the yard. Polijn let her eyes run across the crude coop for the chickens, the broad vegetable garden with its own fence, and the smokehouse. This was one of the two weak points in the plan. Ashena had not been so very big to begin with, and she had been dismembered for easier hiding. Polijn had to guide these people to a bone right away before any of them could decide she was faking. Because that was the other weak point: if her hosts lost their awe of her, there was no place to run.

"Back here?" Gela demanded. "Where?"

Polijn just swept out one arm. "Shovel," she said, moving to the garden. She felt the wood hit her palm and closed her fingers around it. The weight dragged back on her, but she kept her balance. Kicking the gate open, she surveyed the rows of greenery. This had to be quick.

"I don't believe it," Vytty declared. "What would they have been doing here if they were taking the money?"

This made it just about too late. Polijn shrugged. Grasping the handle of the shovel with one hand, she raised the whole instrument to her chest. She drew back on the handle and gave it a hard shove, sending the tool shooting into the air. It was too heavy to go far, but it cleared a dozen rows before it banged to the dirt, cutting off a few beet tops on the way.

"Is that it?" demanded Gela, coming up next to her. "Is that where you want us to dig?"

Her expression imperious, Polijn spread one hand and swung it over the rows of beets. "There and elsewhere. Dig up the whole garden. When he killed her, he cut her into small pieces so he wouldn't have to dig deep and wide to hide the whole body in one place."

"Who?" everyone demanded.

Polijn turned slowly and faced Theid. "You didn't know where Ashena was when you cleaned out the till. Then she darted out of hiding and threatened to tell the others if you didn't share. You knocked her down, probably just to shut her up for the moment. She hit her head, and you shut her up for good."

Theid just looked at her. "Should've said I knocked her down when I caught *her* with the money; could've let her lie. That'll teach me to go to extra work." He rubbed his chin. "And that'll teach me to be careful where I bury bodies."

Polijn looked around the garden. Gela had picked up the shovel. Vytty was looking from Theid to the minstrel and easing toward a hoe in what she no doubt felt was an inconspicuous manner. Theid himself was backing toward the kitchen, either to block the door or to get out of the way of the blood. Theid's robbery and murder were bad for business, but letting a minstrel go out to spread the story would be worse.

She had time for a sentence or two before she joined Ashena under the potatoes. "Do you ever feel like eating potatoes again, Theid?" she demanded. "Where do you go?"

The gardener stared at her. "Go?"

Polijn turned to Vytty. "Have you seen him eat potatoes here? In the last two years, I mean?"

The woman paled. Then she went red. "Pig!" she shouted, hurling the hoe at her brother-in-law.

Theid ducked to the left, but this brought him within reach of his brother, who was swinging the shovel. "Now wait now!" he said, dodging under the first swing. Vytty came at him with lethal-looking fists.

Polijn slipped out of the middle of this discussion; she hated getting in anyone's way. When she reached the kitchen, she found Ashena waiting for her. "Thank you," said the ghost. "When they get done fighting, I expect whoever's left will bury me all in one place."

"I'm not staying to make sure," Polijn told her. "I've had enough of this happy family."

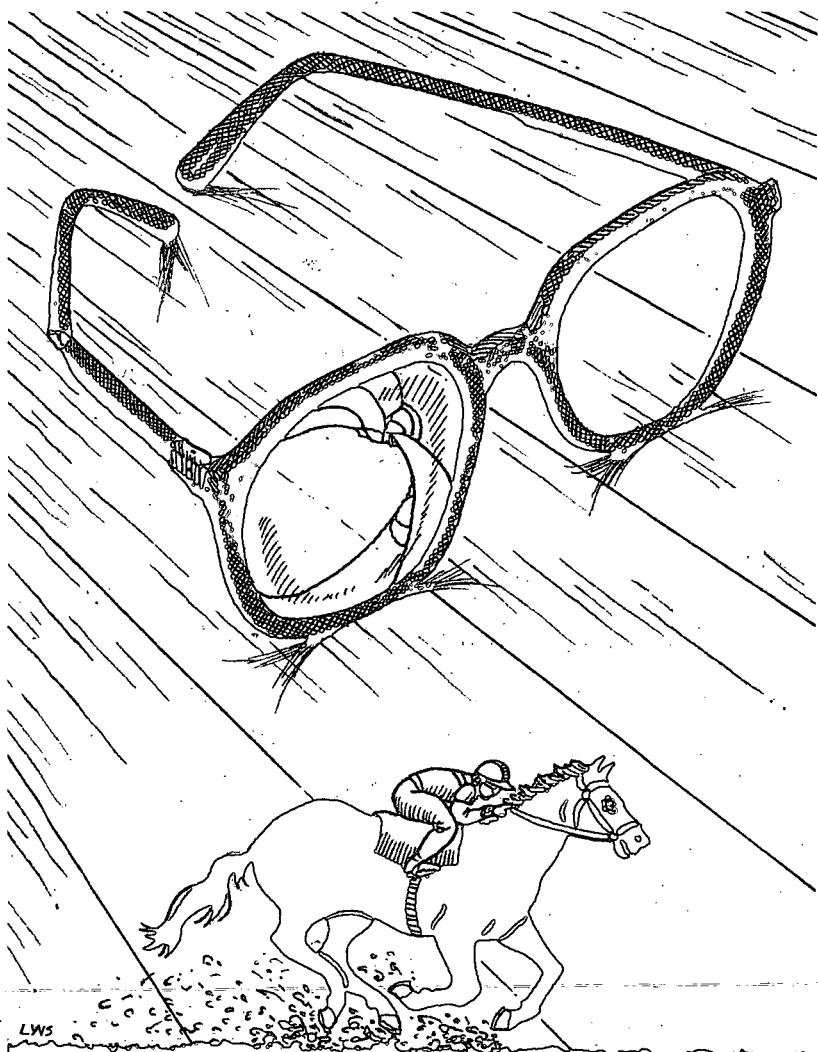
"Me too." Ashena began to fade.

"I'll try not to follow you, whatever way you're going." Polijn looked around the kitchen and took a bunch of carrots to add to her road rations.

"Oh, you'll like those," promised Ashena, whose arms and legs were invisible. "They tickled."

Polijn, casting reproachful eyes on the phantom, set the carrots back and took a peach.

FICTION



BROKEN GLASS

S. L. Franklin

Illustration by Linda Weatherly

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In the blind instant when I saw it, my will to hope seemed to recoil as if from a physical blow, and if I did not despair, I at least became desperate in a different sense. I steadied myself by holding onto the door frame near where I stood, then crossed the motel hallway hurriedly and squatted on my heels to rescue the glinting shard from a spotlighted recess along the opposite wall. The curved, triangular fragment, narrower and more pointed than the tip of my little finger, was unknown to me and yet far too familiar: thick, distortive optical glass, grooved on one rounded edge, razor sharp on both of the others.

It was glass, I was certain, from the spectacles of my husband.

I rose in a forced movement to counteract the darkness that seemed to swim before me; then I straightened my skirt and retraced my steps to the motel lobby, a shabbily grand room of glass and steel, scarred wood laminate, and worn Naugahyde. The blowsy young woman behind the registration counter looked up at me with unintelligent, knowing eyes before saying, "Can I help you?"

At four A.M. a lone woman entering a motel lobby, even a mature woman conservatively dressed, invites a particular interpretation which I decided not to contradict. "The party in Room 134," I said. "He doesn't come to the door."

The girl—she was hardly more than that—flipped through a tray of registration forms in front of her, an act of indiscretion that revealed her inexperience if nothing else, while I waited, focusing my entire

consciousness on her thick, undefined fingers as they sought out and then removed a buff-colored card. My heart seemed to race in my breast.

"Checked out," she said.

"When?" I asked.

She examined me with an expression of curiosity and banal cunning.

I said, "Forgive me, but—" I raised my purse to the counter and found a twenty dollar bill. "I would like to see and then have you make a copy of any information you have on the party in Room 134."

When R. J. failed to arrive home by midnight, failed to call by three A.M., I did for the fourth time in our twenty-four years of marriage what I would wish on no one: I set out in great trepidation to find my husband. This time, at least, I had not the children to consider—they were both away at school—but I myself was older, less resilient and less naive. How, I kept wondering, how was it possible that twenty-four years could vanish as if they had never been, in a brief moment of unforeseen danger?

Such moments had diminished in frequency as Carr Investigations and Security had grown to be almost all security consulting and practically not at all a detective concern, but I had never succeeded in hardening myself to the risks and uncertainties of R. J.'s livelihood. Our agreement for many years had been that if he were delayed more than an hour, for any reason whatsoever, he was to call me.

And he always had called me. He was ever faithful in this as in every

regard—except for those three previous times.

And now a fourth.

At two thirty I began to dress myself, praying as I dressed, and at five minutes before the hour I removed a .22 caliber target pistol from the safe in R. J.'s closet and loaded it with shells. At just past three o'clock I closed the back door of the house quietly behind me and slipped through the cold February night to the minivan sitting out in front of the garage.

Twenty minutes later I was climbing the darkened stairs leading to the offices of Carr Investigations and Security on North Harlem, and twenty-five minutes after that I was turning off South Cicero Avenue into the parking lot of the Star-Crest Motel where, at seven P.M. the previous evening, according to R. J.'s appointment calendar, he was to have met with a Mr. Webb in Room 134.

My thoughts as I had driven the largely deserted thoroughfares had reverted—when not frozen in anxiety—to those similar instances from our past, three lucky escapes. In the first, R. J. had been rescued from grave danger by someone else before my arrival. In the second, he had gained control of the situation in time to answer my anxious knock on the door of his place of incarceration. And in the third, I had discovered him, bound and gagged but otherwise well, in an empty storefront.

Each time I had told myself that I would know, that I would sense his greater absence from my life if he were dead, and each time, in-

deed, I had been correct. This time, however, I was older, I was less sure, I was more conscious of the terrors that always lurked along the edges of his occupation. I sensed again that he was alive, and yet I doubted my own senses.

"You never know," he would say when the subject arose, "you never know what waits for you on the other side of any door." What I knew was that the door to Room 134 failed to open at my knock and that, after I shamelessly picked its lock and entered into an apparently untenanted room, I was at a point of crisis. Finding the shard of glass confirmed the desperate urgency of my enterprise, and so, for twenty dollars, I bought the only information I could: a name and address, possibly false; an automobile make and license number, probably true; and a departure time of one fifteen A.M.

"Did you check the man out?" I asked the young woman at the registration counter.

She hesitated, then nodded sullenly.

I found a ten dollar bill and said, "Can you describe him for me?"

She looked at the bill first, then up at me. "Which one?"

Then I did a foolhardy thing, an inexcusable thing. I laid the bill in front of her and removed the pistol briefly from my purse. "All of them," I said.

Her eyes followed my hand as it drew the gun out and put it back. "Big and small," she said. "Old and young. The old one limped."

"He was Mr. Webb?"

She glanced down. "Prob'ly."

"Gray hair? Bald?"

"Gray. More like white. Big nose."

I let her take the ten dollars from the counter before her first pair of descriptions struck me afresh. "The older one was the small man?"

"No."

An expression in her eyes made me say suddenly, without pausing to consider, "What was the young man's name? You recognized him—didn't you?"

When I examined the information from the registration card my heart sank another time. A name—Harry Webb. An address—Burnside Towers, Reno, Nevada. An Illinois license number on a late-model Buick, meaning, I suspected, that the car was from a rental agency—but which one? And how would that information help me?

I rejected again, as I had in each previous instance, the option of going to the police for help. The police were too slow to act; too constrained by law, method, and procedure; too recognizable from a distance. Speed and stealth, if not also surprise, were the only tools available to me in such situations, and in truth, I distrusted the local jurisdiction—Cicero, Illinois—to be up to the demands of the problem in any case, however much it might help me in tracing the rental car.

I had walked out of the motel lobby in a state of grave distraction and was almost to the minivan in the parking lot when I realized that I was near panic, that I had already, in fact twice, lost my presence of mind. I hurried back inside to confront the young woman at the

counter once more. "I want the telephone numbers of the calls placed," I said to her. The card had indicated two long distance calls.

When she hesitated, I again put my hand in my purse and withdrew the pistol. "You've been sufficiently paid," I remarked, although I would gladly have paid her more had I not already given her most of my cash.

The telephone numbers she produced were identical and from an area code I failed to recognize. I thanked her gracelessly and then was momentarily surprised as I turned away to see a reflection of myself in a mirror along a wall. In spite of the turmoil churning within me, I appeared to be neither frightened nor haggard but much as I usually appeared—neatly dressed, well-formed, in control—and seeing myself thus was somehow a scarifying shock.

On my way from the lobby exit to the minivan I did what my haste and singlemindedness had prevented twenty minutes earlier: I scanned that part of the parking lot for R. J.'s car. Not seeing it, I climbed into the minivan and made a slow progress around the rest of the lot, looking without hope for his gray Chevy Lumina. What I found instead, looping back almost to my starting point, was a Buick Regal with the license number I had noted on Harry Webb's registration form, and when I saw it, my heart jolted unpleasantly within me.

I braked to a halt and left the engine of the minivan running as I inspected it by flashlight. According to a small decal on the rear bumper,

it was an Alamo rental car, and on the floor of the back seat rested a paper shopping bag from Marshall Field's that held two packages wrapped in Field's distinctive green. The vehicle's doors were locked, and I felt suddenly incapable of a second break-in. I tapped sharply on the trunk lid, hoping grimly against hope, and when I got no response, I went back to the minivan wondering what possessed me to think such foolish thoughts. But I knew what possessed me: bodies found in car trunks were an unpleasant, recurring motif of the crime news in Chicago.

Not in this car trunk, however. It came to me, even in the act of tapping, that R. J.'s two hundred thirty pounds would draw down the rear of the vehicle in a noticeable way. And not only that, I thought. The packages in the rear seat revealed something of what was happening: R. J.'s car had been driven away some hours before, probably by Harry Webb and his companion, possibly with R. J. in it as a prisoner, and Harry Webb or someone associated with Harry Webb would be returning soon for the rental car.

Now, I thought, now is the time to call the police.

I felt desperate again, and again almost paralyzed by the demands of the situation. I backed the minivan into an empty space across the aisle from the Buick and attempted to compose my mind before deciding what to do next. I prayed briefly and then tried to order my thoughts:

(1) Two weeks earlier R. J. had

mentioned in passing that he was consulting with a woman who raised thoroughbred horses about upgraded security at her horse farm; (2) the Star-Crest Motel lay roughly half a mile from Sportsman's Park, where the thoroughbred racing season was about to begin despite the winter cold; (3) the smaller, younger man in the company of Harry Webb was believed by the girl at the motel desk to be one of the better known local jockeys, Eddie Mack; (4) Harry Webb, called by that or any other name, claimed residence in Nevada, where gambling was a major enterprise; (5) with the recent closing of Arlington Race Course, Sportsman's Park had become by default the major venue for thoroughbred horserace gambling in Chicago.

The general background, in other words, was far from opaque, but what I or anyone else could do to find my husband quickly, alive and well was a critically different problem.

The clock on the dashboard read four thirty-one.

Within the nature of the crime lies the solution to the crime.

I startled into alertness as two things happened at once: this cryptic thought rose to the surface of my half-dozing consciousness, and the headlights of an approaching vehicle swept their beams down the aisle of the parking lot. I immediately switched off the ignition, which I had kept running for the sake of warmth, and ducked my head, not wishing to be noticed there alone

but especially not by anyone concerned with the Buick across the aisle. The dashboard clock changed from four thirty-five to four thirty-six at that moment as if to underscore my five minutes of inattention, and I could almost hear the voice of my husband telling me, as he often had, that keeping watch from a car in the middle of the night was the hardest thing he had ever done as a detective.

Tears suddenly welled in my eyes and slid down my cheeks, even as I twisted myself lower behind the steering wheel. How could I go on, I wondered, what would my life be worth to me, unless I could continue to hear that voice?

As if in answer I heard the voice itself saying to me, *Don't panic, Ginny. Don't ever panic. The one thing you can never do in an investigation is to panic.*

Through the crescent formed by the rim of the steering wheel above the dashboard I forced myself to watch, forced myself to carry on, as the car, a dark-colored sport-utility vehicle, rolled slowly up the aisle and halted behind the Buick. Nothing happened for thirty seconds or so, but then a smallish young man too heavysset to be the jockey Eddie Mack got out on the passenger side. During the interval when the interior light flashed on, I could see that the driver was another unknown, a woman in a leather coat with long, light-colored hair curled at the shoulder. The instant the young man slammed the door she drove the vehicle away, leaving him staring after her with a displeased expression.

And then began what I still think of as my journey through the Slough of Despond.

What else could I do but follow the young man in the Buick? When he turned south out of the lot onto Cicero Avenue, I hurried in pursuit because, of my few choices, this seemed the only one that provided immediate action. For the first two miles I trailed him by a city block in the light, scattered traffic, but then I closed to within fifty yards as a new apprehension arose within me: Midway Airport lay a short distance ahead, and what if that were his destination?

In the pre-dawn darkness I saw as we approached that the airport was illuminated to the brightness of midday. At the Fifty-fifth Street intersection I drew to a halt directly behind the Buick, and when the traffic signal changed to green, my fear was realized: the right turn signal of the Buick began flashing to indicate its entry into the terminal area.

I followed along, and my heart sank further as the Buick moved into the traffic lane marked RENTAL CAR RETURN. I drove past into the semicircular drive for arrivals and departures with a mind so blank, with a hope so thin, that I barely kept control of the wheel in my anxiety to look back, to follow the course of the Buick.

NO PARKING. NO PARKING. NO PARKING.

Even at five A.M. a policeman stood on the walkway to prevent this particular breach of the law. I followed the curving drive back on-

to Cicero, headed north, and turned a second time into the airport drive. SHORT TERM PARKING read a sign, and I swerved across two traffic lanes to follow its pointing arrow. I took a ticket from a machine, noting the price of four dollars for one hour, all I could afford, and began looking for a parking space as near the rental car return as possible.

Or that, at least, was my plan until I realized that the first vehicle I saw beyond the cross-aisle ahead was R. J.'s gray Chevy Lumina.

Within the nature of the crime lies the solution to the crime.

The barren, orange-tinted brightness of the sodium vapor lamps seemed to unmask me from myself. I parked the minivan, stepped out onto the hard pavement, closed and locked the door, all with the certitude of my next doomful obligation. I did not look around but forced my legs to carry me through a double row of vehicles, across an aisle, along the trunks of cars until I came to the Chevy. The back half of the Chevy sagged downward.

I prayed a silent prayer; then I inserted a key into the lock and raised the lid quickly, hearing still the voice in my ear that counseled me not to panic.

What I found inside, however, was the huddled dead body of a large adult male, and when I saw it, my vision seemed to go blank in spite of every whispered admonition. It was *wrong*, I thought. The body was completely wrong.

I turned my head away for a moment, praying to regain control,

then I looked again, and this time I saw that the man was dead from a terrible strangulation, but I also saw in this same instant that he was not my husband—not *my husband*. He was a man of greater age, of lesser height and breadth of shoulder, a man with far, far whiter hair than R. J.'s salt and pepper gray. He was a man, I then realized, to whom I thought I could put a name: Harry Webb.

And Harry Webb had shards of broken glass spilling over the lapels of his coat.

I closed the trunk quickly and peered across six double rows of parked vehicles to the rental return area where, through a strange conjunction of evil, the small, heavy-set young man now walked into view with his hands in his coat pockets, as if waiting for a ride after having returned Harry Webb's car. For a short eternity of seconds I stood there watching, swaying mentally, if not also physically, in a numbness of horror, but then I gained sufficient command of myself to hurry back to the minivan.

At five forty-six the Jeep Grand Cherokee signaled a right turn into the Hungry Traveller-Pancake House, and after slowing to make sure of the driver's intent, I moved to the left lane and signaled my own turn into the combination service station and convenience store across the highway. ATM MACHINE read the sign in the window, and my first act after a visit to the restroom was to replenish my supply of cash. Then, because my inward anxiety warned me away from coffee, I

purchased a large steaming cup of hot water and a teabag with a ten dollar bill and asked for my change in quarters. The location of the establishment's pay phone gave me a clear view of the parking lot across the road, and I felt at ease at least in that one portion of my endeavor.

First I called the Elm Grove High School, where I held a student counseling position, to leave word that I was having to claim a "personal day" to attend to a family emergency, and I was struck even as I spoke by the apparent calmness of my voice as I mouthed this formulaic message with my heart virtually in my throat. Then, with an unsteady hand, I entered the number that had been called from Room 134 of the Star-Crest Motel and, after inserting over five dollars in quarters, heard the ringing of a distant telephone. I got a recorded female voice with tinny music in the background: "This is the Harry Webb Agency," it said. "Harry's out right now solving a case, but his next investigation can be for you. Leave your name and telephone number, and Harry will return your call in guaranteed confidentiality. Harry Webb is licensed, bonded, and insured, with over thirty years' experience as a private investigator..."

I hung up the receiver and stared blindly across the way, thinking very little about Harry Webb, who had solved his last case, thinking dire thoughts instead about a different investigator.

Dawn was breaking gradually, I noticed, revealing a deep, clear sky interspersed with furrowed clouds. What was I to do next? I returned

to the sales counter for a bland looking muffin—all the food I thought my stomach could handle—and carried it and the tea outside, where I stood beside the door, preferring the cold, open air for a few moments to being confined. I saw that the traffic flowing by me on Cicero Avenue had grown considerably heavier, evidence that the morning rush hour was starting to build, before I looked across the road yet again, compulsively, as if my subconscious being could not accept the fact that the stocky young man and the light-haired woman were ordinary enough, after an obscure night of crime, to want breakfast. But the black, squarish vehicle remained where they had parked it fifteen minutes earlier.

I broke off a piece of the muffin and ate it, then sipped at the still scalding tea, feeling spent beyond exhaustion and nearly without hope but compelled to go on following the couple as I had already for nearly half an hour, heading farther and farther south. Our progress thus far had been maddeningly slow, delayed by a freight train at a crossing but more by the erratic driving of the woman, who seemed unable to keep up her speed and her argument with the young man simultaneously. Of my trailing presence I was certain they had no idea, so deeply were they engaged in dispute.

I ate the final piece of the muffin and disposed of its wrapper and paper napkin in a trash bin, then carried the rest of my tea to the minivan, glancing again across the

highway. When I looked back, I saw with a start that the vehicle parked beyond the minivan—a vehicle that had been parked there since I had emerged from the store—was a small, older Honda with a dented hood that I had noticed in my rear view mirror for much of my trip from the Midway Terminal to the service station. It stood unoccupied and had been unoccupied for almost ten minutes.

I turned quickly to look into the store. Two customers were visible in front of the counter clerk, a woman and a man, and I had taken unconscious note of them both as they passed into the store from the gasoline pumps. Another man was outside pumping gas. Yet another was unloading trays of bread from a van. Otherwise, not a single soul was in view.

For no clear reason a fresh panic rose in my breast as it had not even in the worst moments of the earlier morning hours. The counseling voice had become thin and shallow, so thin and shallow that it was all but drowned out by a roaring in my ears—a roaring of blood—and all at once I knew I needed to remove myself from that spot immediately, away from the ominous and coincidental Honda. I opened the door of the minivan and assumed the driver's seat quickly, turned the key in the ignition, shifted the gear lever.

And in that very moment my heart leaped.

A clear, audible voice spoke to me from behind the rear seat, and it was my husband's voice—*my husband's voice*.

"Ginny," it said. "Ginny, it's me. Don't look around."

W*ithin the nature of the crime lies the solution to the crime.*

Tears welled in my eyes, and I cried out—not loudly but meaningly. I put the gear back into PARK, then found a handkerchief, all the while sobbing.

My heart had known what my mind had refused to accept.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," the voice said from behind me. I searched in the rear view mirror but saw nothing.

"If—if they arrest you," I replied, still half-sobbing, "I'm not—posting bail. I refuse. I want you where I know you're safe! How could you possibly drive, R. J., without your glasses?"

"You know about that, eh? Well, I've still got the right lens. It's cracked, but..."

"But what?"

"Well—the left eye's pretty swollen anyway, from where I took a sap, so—"

"R. J.!"

"It's all right. It's all right."

"Yes," I said finally, after a silence. "It is all right. Now. Thank God. But I don't suppose you're in the mood to see a doctor or go straight home. The body of a detective named Harry Webb is in the trunk of your car, dead by strangulation—"

"I put him there, yeah. Not by choice. They had the guns, but they couldn't lift him."

"And pieces of your left lens fell out as you did it," I said after a pause to consider. "How ordinary, when I was sure they were trying

to be clever. Who are *they*?"

"A trainer named Mick Hunter. A jockey named Eddie Mack. Two thugs whose names I don't know. Eddie Mack's sister, who's a groom and a stable jockey. The big number, though, is a gambler out of Reno named either Douglas or Ross, depending on where he is. I've never seen him."

"And the pair across the road?"

"Hunter and Mack's sister. I forget her name. Shall I fill you in?"

"Are you hungry?" I asked. "I—" "Thirsty, yeah."

"I'll get something quickly." I hurried back into the store and returned with two cans of diet cola and three doughnuts, an awful combination. "Could I just see you once?" I said, after I set these items on the seat behind me.

"All right." His head and shoulders appeared around the side of the bench seat. The blow he had suffered was evident mainly in bruised swelling over the eye, but I saw dried blood as well.

"For once the left side looks as bad as the right," he commented, referring to his birthmarked right cheek. He had removed his glasses, which meant that I was little more than a blurred outline to him five feet away.

"Diet cola—my favorite," he said. "And convenience store doughnuts." He grimaced in my direction before drawing back. "While you were inside I decided on a change of plan."

"Yes?" My heart felt measurably lighter.

"It's pretty clear at this point where Hunter and the Mack wom-

an are headed, so why don't we get there first? And that way I could sit up."

He instructed me to head south once again on Cicero. As soon as I shifted into gear, he said, "To begin with the background: there's a woman named Vera Kelley, around my age, recently widowed by a much older husband. Owner of a horse farm way out south, not too far from Balmoral Park near Crete. That's where we're heading."

He sighed. "Pull over in about half a mile, and I'll move up front. This Kelley woman hadn't paid much attention to the management of the stables while her husband was alive, but when some professional people came around looking at ponies, they commented on the lack of modern security in the barns, or that's her story. Remember the Vanderhoff case? Well, the older brother is still selling specialty insurance out that way, and he gave her my name. I did some research, spent a day and a half in the presence of horse's asses—fourlegged as well as two—and was more or less sleepwalking through the job, which was okay but nothing special in terms of difficulty."

I drove onto the shoulder of the road, and R. J. eased out the side door and climbed into the front passenger seat. "I'm a mess, I know," he said after slipping his glasses on and reaching over to squeeze my hand. His hair was rumped; his clothing was soiled; his face was raw in places; the frames on his nose were bent and cracked, and the left side held no lens at all.

He looked wonderful to me.

"It was a surprise," he said once we had regained the road. "Completely. I went out Tuesday morning to check over the first stage of the security installation and discovered that someone had tried very hard to find a way to circumvent the motion sensors. The sequence in the control board was messed up in just that way. It could have been someone playing around—but then my car was broken into and my briefcase rifled while I was right there on the premises. It didn't make sense unless it was someone who knew who I was and what was going on, so it made me wonder a little if my client were being less than frank about the extent of her problems."

"And suspicions? How did her husband die?"

"It was *where* he died that interested me more, once I found out: a hotel room in Reno. A history of heart problems, so no autopsy. Probable cause was a coronary of some kind. He was on a business trip to see a Mr. Douglas.

"That's as far as I'd had time to take it when I found a call on the office answering machine yesterday morning from a man claiming to be Webb. He identified himself as a private detective investigating Douglas's connection to Kelley from the Nevada end, and did I want to compare notes? He named some law enforcement people in Nevada who would verify his credentials and said seven o'clock at his motel was the best time for him. So I called one of the people, who said he was okay, then called the motel. He

was out, so I left a message that I'd be there."

"Curious, no doubt, as to how he knew you were interested in the entire subject."

"Well—he was a detective. You must have tracked me to the motel, so you know what it's like. I just strolled around until I found his room and knocked on the door, and as I did so, these two ordinary looking guys came walking along the corridor from the opposite way and I didn't even see the sap. Wow. I've got a lump like a golfball behind my ear. . . . Well anyway, when I came to, I was tied up hand and foot in a motel room—not Webb's—with my own pistol being trained on me by one of the thugs.

"I was gagged, of course, and my glasses half smashed. My guess, actually, is that Harry Webb never knew I existed. The call was a set-up by someone else—probably Douglas—to get me in Webb's general vicinity as the fall guy for killing him. But I could be wrong." He yawned loudly, twice. "There's this terrible temptation, Ginny, just to go home and sleep."

"Or call in the police? Now that you're safe—"

He shook his head. "In the first place, safety is a delusion, and in the second place, the damage is already done. If I call the cops too soon, they'll just scatter the birds, and believe me, this is one time when I want to bag the whole flock. I don't like being sapped, and I don't like being suckered."

When I presented no opposition, he opened the second cola and drank deeply. "Well. Back to the

tale. The guy watching me could have passed for a deaf-mute. A lot of time went by slowly, and I started worrying about you more than me, when finally there was a tapping from the window end of the room. The thug pulled back some drapes and undid a sliding glass door facing the parking lot to let in the other thug. They untied my legs and got me on my feet and pushed me out through the door and into a car parked right there—my car. The dashboard clock said twelve twenty-five. We drove about ten minutes to an old bungalow across from a row of industrial buildings and went inside. I sensed other people in the house without seeing them.

"Except for the sap, though, I've been treated worse. They let me use the bathroom and drink some water, then they tied me up again and left me in a bedroom. Later on I heard voices from the rest of the house that turned into a sizable shouting match on the subject of 'what to do about Webb.' Then there was a quiet space of maybe ten minutes, then Eddie Mack, the jockey, came into the room with a homemade mask over his face, untied me at gunpoint, and said I was needed to help. Out in the hall was his sister in another homemade mask, believe it or not, a paper bag like the poorer kids used to wear at Halloween when I was growing up. I pretended not to recognize them, even though I'd seen them both at Kelley Stables. We went out the back to the alley, and there in the dark we wrestled Webb's body out of the front seat of the Chevy and

folded it into the trunk, me supplying most of the muscle. Somebody in the back seat had strangled him from behind with my necktie—did I mention it was gone?—and you're right: that's when I lost the last pieces out of my left lens.

"Anyhow, on the way back inside, I saw a clock that read two forty, and then I had more solitary confinement. By then I also felt pretty sure they weren't going to kill me right away, so I let myself relax."

"You fell asleep, in other words," I said.

"Dozed, yeah. I'd been sapped pretty hard.

"Eventually," he said after a moment, "I heard more arguing. Three voices, two male and one female. I recognized one of the male voices as Mick Hunter's—a guy I'd talked to quite a bit at Kelley Stables. He trained the horses the stable is entering at Sportsman's Park in a couple of weeks, and Eddie Mack was scheduled to ride them. Mick and Mack—what a pair.

"I felt enough better by then that I decided I should try to get loose. I'd palmed a big chunk of glass from what fell out of my lenses into the car trunk, and the woman had let me get away with adding a little play in the cord when she tied me up again, so I managed to saw it at one spot—and my wrist a little, too—until I could snap it.

"By that time it was quiet again. As soon as I got my arms and legs working I slipped on my coat and peeked out into the hall. I could see Eddie Mack off in the living room staring at a television. My watch read ten to five. I heard some oth-

er sounds, and in came Mack's sister through the front door. 'I forgot my bag,' she said. She picked up a suitcase affair and walked out. As soon as I heard an engine start up outside, I rushed her brother and wrapped him up in about five seconds—not exactly a fair fight—and I had him bound and gagged in my old spot in another couple of minutes. I tried calling home but you didn't answer, so I went out to the alley and borrowed his car with the idea of going back to the motel. After I got over to Cicero, driving pretty fast for a one-eyed blind man, I spotted Mack's sister pulling out of an all-night service station, so I fell in line."

He sighed. "You know most of the rest, except, well, when I saw the minivan there at Midway . . ."

He halted for so long that I looked across at him. He was staring down at the broken glasses in his hands.

"It had been a fairly long dark night, you know, with a couple of pretty hard bumps—"

"And a murder."

"And a murder, yeah. But when I saw you, Ginny, when I saw you, I felt like I was in the right place, the place I was supposed to be."

We drove on in silence for a few moments because I was unwilling to trust my voice to make a reply. I wanted to tell him all my earlier thoughts—how near I had been to panic; how terrible had been my fear for him—but when I finally spoke I said simply, "I know. *How I know.*"

"We're strange people, I guess,"

he responded. "Still to be this way after all these years."

"Sometimes . . . sometimes I think we're just one person, R. J., the two of us. We're only whole when we're together."

He put his hand out to touch mine, then said, "Well. We're getting close, so we'd better compare notes and make a plan. What do you know that I don't?"

"I know—" I replied, thinking hard. "I know embarrassingly little. I know that your car is in the short term parking lot at the airport, which helps not at all. I know that Harry Webb checked out of the motel at one fifteen A.M. uncoerced and in the presence of Eddie Mack. I know—or rather I *sense*—that Mick Hunter is somehow at odds with the others but not so much that he isn't going along with whatever their program is for the time being. I know—that I wouldn't be any other place at this moment, not by choice."

"Here's what I know," he said. "Stables get going early, and Hunter and the Mack woman are going to be late for work. Don't know if it matters. I know that Eddie Mack isn't going to show up at all short of a miracle, considering the knots I tied on him, and I know that when he doesn't show up, consternation will ensue. That can't be helped because what I really know is that a man named Ross and his two associates, the thugs who sapped me, are coming early this morning on the pretext of examining horses for possible purchase, but I know also from what I overheard that he's really Douglas and he wants to see

one horse in particular named Phil's Pepperpot, and maybe a couple of others as camouflage."

"Why?"

"To make sure Phil's Pepperpot is the real thing, I'd guess. Because what I think Mick and Mack were doing was holding the horse back in previous races to boost the betting odds. Douglas is in on it in a financial way that isn't hard to figure, and Terrence Kelley's death fits right in the middle, with the big payoff coming up in a race at Sportsman's where the horse is going to be given its head."

"And Harry Webb?"

"I don't know how he fits in except as a threat and a victim."

"A very serious threat to be such a terrible victim." I thought for a moment. "He was killed in the presence of Eddie Mack. They drove you away from the motel in your car, then came back to get Webb. Webb trusted Mack, or he wouldn't have checked out with Mack and left with him, which suggests that Mack and Webb got into the front seat of the car, and the killer was hidden in the back. The murder itself was probably a nasty surprise to the Macks and Hunter, don't you think, considering that the disposal of Webb's body was so obviously left up to them as a means of coercion and intimidation?"

"It looks that way, yeah. With me as the ultimate fall guy. That part's very weak, though, unless I was scheduled to be dead, too, so—"

"R. J.?" I said abruptly. "Can we trust Vera Kelley?"

"Probably. But why?"

"Because she's the most likely

person—the only likely person—to have hired a private detective in Nevada to investigate Terrence Kelley's death. Or don't you agree?"

After a long pause he answered, "Yeah. All right. I agree."

"Then—what kind of a woman is she?"

"Well, she's tough as leather," he said. "That was my first impression, and it still holds. Not stupid, I'd say, but not really bright either. She's—she's a horsewoman, if that explains it. You should see her ride." He pointed. "Those are the stables coming up on the left. So what are we going to do? Bring her into it?"

The clock on the dashboard read six forty-one.

Within the solution to the crime lies the nature of the crime.

The finale to the affair took place on the far reaches of the horse farm, where at roughly seven thirty A.M. R. J. and I, dressed in borrowed construction workers' garb, were using a transit and tape measure to pretend to survey a line not far from a small gathering of men alongside a muddy half-mile track. R. J. wore the spare work overalls of the foreman of the company performing the security installation, plus a cap with large earflaps to hide the birthmark on his cheek. I slogged along beside him in a yellow-orange insulated jumpsuit and olive green snap-up galoshes, both far too large for me. My hair was tucked into a hard hat, and my target pistol was hidden in a deep zippered pocket.

If I had not been so utterly exhausted, I would have found the

situation amusing, if not comical. As it was, R. J.'s calm presence was almost all that carried me along, other than the impetus of bringing the business to an end.

At a spot about a hundred feet from the group of men, R. J. spread the legs of the transit and thrust a stake into the ground beneath its dangling plumb.

"The birds are gathered," he said. "So be careful."

I looked away for a short time, noting half-consciously the bleak winter landscape and the even bleaker sun riding low above a horizon of barren trees to the east. Then I looped the end of the tape measure over the stake and unreeled the device slowly, walking backwards, until I came to a point perhaps three yards behind the pair of men who had attacked my husband the previous evening. In front of them stood Mick Hunter and a stockily built but otherwise nondescript person in a fedora and an expensive overcoat who, presumably, was the man calling himself Ross.

R. J., his face hidden behind the telescopic viewer of the transit, yelled, "Right—about a foot!"

I moved to my right, closer to the two thugs, who were glancing back occasionally to observe. R. J. waved, and I planted the long graded pole I had also been carrying even closer to the group of men. I stood there silently, listening.

"... I don't like girl jocks, Hunter. I want to see Mack up, or it's no go."

The trainer didn't answer. After a short, tension-filled silence, one of the thugs said, "Here they come."

I chanced a look behind me and saw a distant horse and rider rounding a curve into open view from the direction of the stables. I turned and waved broadly at R. J., who folded the transit, undid the end of the tape measure, and came trotting up as I reeled the measure in. In the meantime Ross had taken out a pair of field glasses to watch the horse's slow, regular approach. "It's not Mack," he growled.

"So it's Cindy," Hunter responded. "Keep your shirt on. She rides the Pepperpot more than her brother anyway."

"Yeah, but where's Mack?"

Again Hunter failed to respond until he said abruptly, "That's not Cindy."

"Don't kid me, Hunter," said the other man. "It's a girl jock—look." He thrust the glasses before the trainer's face.

"It's . . . Mrs. Kelley." Hunter pushed the glasses away and stared around wildly. When he saw R. J. and me standing close behind, he screamed, "And it's *him*! The snoop! You killed that guy, Douglas—and now here's the snoop!"

R. J. delivered a disabling karate kick to the thug in front of him, then tackled the other. I brandished my pistol and shouted, "Put your hands up, everyone!" Mick Hunter assailed Douglas with loud curses and threatening gestures, and Douglas responded by grasping the smaller man and throwing him to the ground. Then he turned and ran down the track with churning legs and flailing arms.

"R. J.!" I cried. "Douglas—!"

R. J. sprang up from disarming

the thug and sprinted after Douglas, but he had barely reached full stride when Vera Kelley flashed past him on Phil's Pepperpot, galloping in pursuit.

As for Douglas, the hat he wore blew away as he ran, and his long headstart shrank to scant yards before he reached the first turn of the track. At the very last second he glared back with an expression of angry fear in his eyes and in so doing tripped crazily over his own feet and plunged headlong to the muddy turf.

"No-o-o!" he screamed, but Vera Kelley spurred the horse into a vault that easily cleared his prostrate form. He pushed up to his knees almost instantly with a drawn pistol in one hand, but before he could raise it, my husband crashed into him from behind in a tackle that had all the momentum of a runaway train. When R. J. clambered to his feet, he had an unconscious Douglas by the collar in one hand and Douglas's pistol in the other—at the apparently inevitable cost of what had remained of the lens in his spectacles.

And that, thank God, was the end.

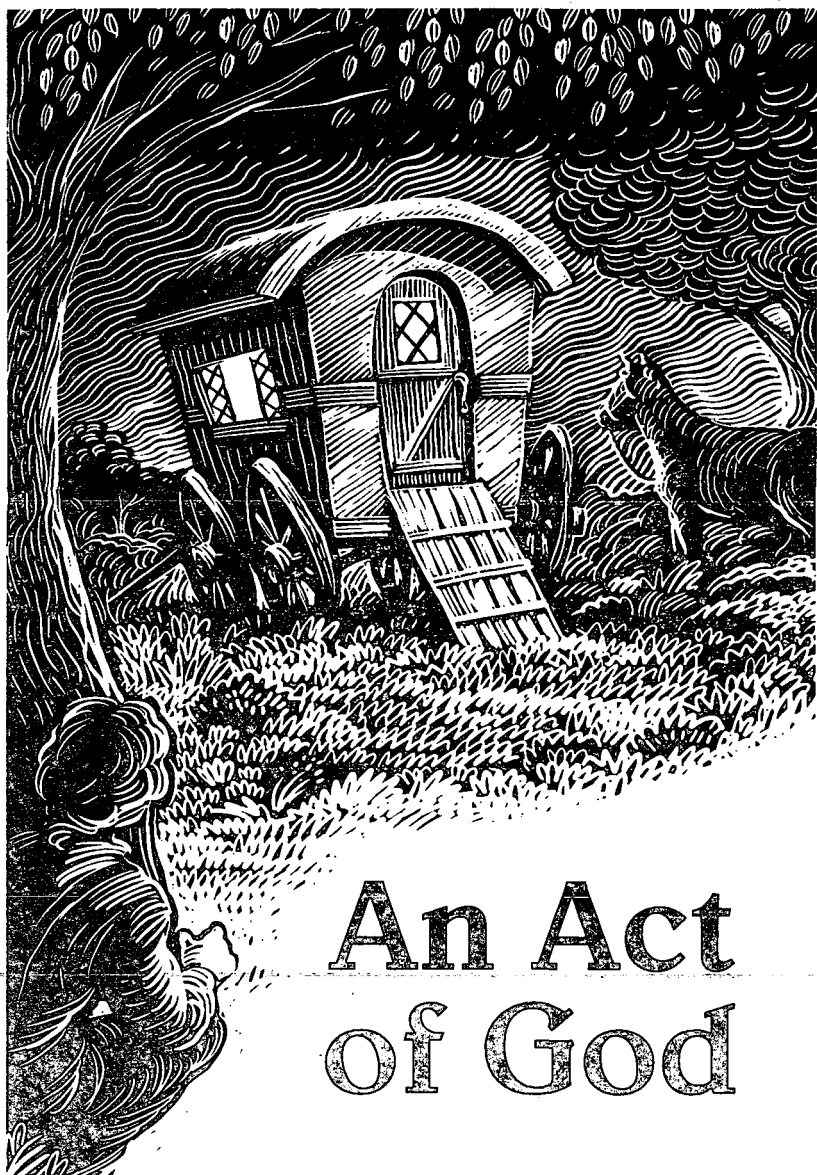
The local sheriff's deputies ar-

rived shortly thereafter to take the criminals into custody, and later that morning they let R. J. and me go home to Elm Grove. When we stumbled into the house at around noon, nevertheless, we weren't at all buoyed by the positive conclusion to the case, but rather the opposite. We were too tired to eat, too tired to wash—dirty, sore, achy, middle-aged. We undressed with almost no conversation and went straight to bed and, for me at least, almost immediately to sleep.

The light of afternoon had long faded when I awoke, still curled in the comfort of R. J.'s arms, and—with the confusion of unsettling dreams yet upon me—I wondered for a moment if I had dreamed the desperate events of the early morning hours as well. R. J.'s bruised temple told me otherwise, though, as did my stiff, sore body when I eased away from him and out of bed. But the final proof came to me in the form of a piece of broken glass on the bedside table—strange souvenir from a stranger experience.

As a reminder to myself of many things, I put it in the bottom of my keepsake box.

MYSTERY CLASSIC



An Act of God

Melville Davisson Post

Illustration by Tim Foley

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/00

It was the last day of the county fair, and I stood beside my Uncle Abner, on the edge of the crowd, watching the performance of a mountebank.

On a raised platform before a little house on wheels stood a girl dressed like a gypsy, with her arms extended while an old man out in the crowd, standing on a chair, was throwing great knives that hemmed her in with a steel hedge. The girl was very young, scarcely more than a child, and the man was old, but he was hale and powerful. He wore wooden shoes, travel-worn purple velvet trousers, a red sash, and a white blouse of a shirt open at the throat.

I was watching the man, whose marvelous skill fascinated me. He seemed to be looking always at the crowd of faces that passed between him and the wagon, and yet the great knife fell to a hair on the target, grazing the body of the girl.

But while the old man with his sheaf of knives held my attention, it was the girl that Abner looked at. He stood studying her face with a strange, rapt attention. Sometimes he lifted his head and looked vacantly over the crowd with the eyelids narrowed, like one searching for a memory that eluded him; then he came back to the face in its cluster of dark ringlets, framed in knives that stood quivering in the poplar board.

It was thus that my father found us when he came up.

"Have you noticed Blackford about?" he said; "I want to see him."

"No," replied Abner, "but he should be here, I think; he is at every frolic."

"I sent him the money for his cattle last night," my father went on, "and I wish to know if he got it."

Abner turned upon him at that. "You will always take a chance with that scoundrel, Rufus," he said, "and someday you will be robbed. His lands are covered with a deed of trust."

"Well," replied my father with his hearty laugh, "I shall not be robbed this time. I have Blackford's request over his signature for the money, with the statement that the letter is to be evidence of its payment."

And he took an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Abner.

My uncle read the letter to the end, and then his great fingers tightened on the sheet and he read it carefully again, and yet again, with his eyes narrowed and his jaw protruding. Finally he looked my father in the face. "Blackford did not write this letter!" he said.

"Not write it!" my father cried. "Why, man, I know the deaf mute's writing like a book. I know every line and slant of his letters, and every crook and twist of his signature."

But my uncle shook his head.

My father was annoyed.

"Nonsense!" he said. "I can call a hundred men on these fairgrounds who will swear that Blackford made every stroke of the pen in that letter, even against his denial, and though he bring Moses and the prophets to support him."

Abner looked my father steadily in the face.

"That is true, Rufus," he said; "the thing is perfect. There is no letter or line or stroke or twist of the pen that varies from Blackford's hand, and every grazer in the hills, to a man, will swear upon the Bible that he wrote it. Blackford himself cannot tell this writing from his own, nor can any other living man, and yet the deaf-mute did not write it."

"Well," said my father, "yonder is Blackford now; we will ask him."

But they never did.

I saw the tall deaf-mute swagger up and enter the crowd before the mountebank's wagon. And then a thing happened. The chair upon which the old man stood broke under him. He fell, and the great knife in his hand swerved downward and went through the deaf-mute's body as though it were a cheese. The man was dead when we picked him up; the knifeblade stood out between his shoulders, and the haft was jammed against his bloody coat.

We carried him into the Agricultural Hall among the prize apples and the pumpkins, summoned Squire Randolph from the cattle pens, and brought the mountebank before him.

Randolph came in his big blustering manner and sat down as though he were the judge of all the world. He heard the evidence, and upon the word of every witness the tragedy was an accident clean through. But it was an accident that made one shudder. It came swift and deadly and unforeseen, like a vengeance of God in the Book of Kings. One passing among his fellows, in no apprehension, had been smitten out of life. There was terror in the mystery of selection that had thus claimed Blackford in this crowd for death. It brought our voices to a whisper to feel how unprotected a man was in this life, and how little we could see.

And yet the thing had the aspect of design and moved with our stern scriptural beliefs. In the pulpit this deaf-mute had been an example and a warning. His life was profligate and loose. He was a cattle shipper who knew the abominations indexed by the Psalmist. He was an Ishmaelite in more ways than his affliction. He had no wife nor child, nor any next of kin. He had been predestined to an evil end by every good housewife in the hills. He would go swiftly and by violence into hell, the preachers said, and swiftly and by violence he had gone on this autumn morning when the world was like an Eden.

He lay there among the sheaves of corn and the fruits and cereals of the earth, so fully come to the end predestined that those who had cried the prophecy the loudest were the most amazed. With all their vapors they could not believe that God would be so expeditious, and they

spoke in whispers and crowded about on tiptoe as though the Angel of the Lord stood at the entrance of this little festal hall, as before the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.

Randolph could do nothing but find the thing an accident and let the old man go. But he thundered from behind his table on the dangers of such a trade as this. And all the time the mountebank stood stupidly before him like a man dazed and the little girl wept and clung to the big peasant's hand. Randolph pointed to the girl and told the old man that he would kill her someday and with the gestures and authority of omnipotence forbade his trade. The old mountebank promised to cast his knives into the river and get at something else. Randolph spoke upon the law of accidents sententiously for some thirty minutes, quoted Lord Blackstone and Mr. Chitty, called the thing an act of God, within a certain definition of the law, and rose.

My Uncle Abner had been standing near the door, looking on with a grave, undecipherable face. He had gone through the crowd to the chair when the old man fell, had drawn the knife out of Blackford's body, but he had not helped to carry him in, and he had remained by the door, his big shoulders towering above the audience. Randolph stopped beside him as he went out, took a pinch of snuff, and trumpeted in his big, many-colored handkerchief.

"Ah, Abner," he said, "do you concur in my decision?"

"You called the thing an act of God," replied Abner, "and I concur in that."

"And so it is," said Randolph with judicial pomp; "the writers on the law, in their disquisitions upon torts, include within that term those inscrutable injuries that no human intelligence can foresee; for instance, floods, earthquakes, and tornadoes."

"Now, that is very stupid in the writers on the law," replied Abner; "I should call such injuries acts of the devil. It would not occur to me to believe that God would use the agency of the elements in order to injure the innocent."

"Well," said Randolph, "the writers upon the law have not been theologians, although Mr. Greenleaf was devout, and Chitty with a proper reverence, and my lords Coke and Blackstone and Sir Matthew Hale in respectable submission to the established church. They have grouped and catalogued injuries with delicate and nice distinctions with respect to their being actionable at law, and they found certain injuries to be acts of God, but I do not read that they found any injury to be an act of the devil. The law does not recognize the sovereignty and dominion of the devil."

"Then," replied Abner, "with great fitness is the law represented blindfold. I have not entered any jurisdiction where his writs have failed to run."

There was a smile about the door that would have broken into laughter but for the dead man inside.

Randolph blustered, consulted his snuffbox, and turned the conversation into a neighboring channel.

"Do you think, Abner," he said, "that this old showman will give up his dangerous practice as he promised me?"

"Yes," replied Abner, "he will give it up, but not because he promised you."

And he walked away to my father, took him by the arm, and led him aside.

"Rufus," he said, "I have learned something. Your receipt is valid."

"Of course it is valid," replied my father; "it is in Blackford's hand."

"Well," said Abner, "he cannot come back to deny it, and I will not be a witness for him."

"What do you mean, Abner?" my father said. "You say that Blackford did not write this letter, and now you say that it is valid."

"I mean," replied Abner, "that when the one entitled to a debt receives it, that is enough."

Then he walked away into the crowd, his head lifted and his fingers locked behind his massive back.

The county fair closed that evening in much gossip and many idle comments on Blackford's end. The chimney corner lawyers, riding out with the homing crowd, vaped upon Mr. Jefferson's Statute of Descents, and how Blackford's property would escheat to the state since there was no next of kin, and were met with the information that his lands and his cattle would precisely pay his debts, with an eagle or two beyond for a coffin. And, after the manner of lawyers, were not silenced, but laid down what the law would be if only the facts were agreeable to their premise. And the prophets, sitting in their wagons, assembled their witnesses and established the dates at which they had been prophetically delivered.

Evening descended, and the fairgrounds were mostly deserted. Those who lived at no great distance had moved their livestock with the crowd and had given up their pens and stalls. But my father, who always brought a drove of prize cattle to these fairs, gave orders that we should remain until the morning. The distance home was too great and the roads were filled. My father's cattle were no less sacred than the bulls of Egypt, and not to be crowded by a wagon wheel or ridden into by a shouting drunkard.

The night fell. There was no moon, but the earth was not in darkness. The sky was clear and sown with stars like a seeded field. I did not go to bed in the cattle stall filled with clover hay under a handwoven blanket as I was intended to do. A youngster at a certain age is a sort of jackal and loves nothing in this world so much as to prowl over the ground

where a crowd of people has encamped. Besides, I wished to know what had become of the old mountebank, and it was a thing I soon discovered.

His wagon stood on the edge of the ground among the trees near the river, with the door closed. His horse, tethered to a wheel, was nosing an armful of hay. The light of the stars filtered through the treetops, filled the wheels with shadows and threw one side of the wagon into the blackness of the pit. I went down to the fringe of trees; there I sat squatted on the earth until I heard a footstep and saw my Uncle Abner coming toward the wagon. He walked as I had seen him walking in the crowd, his hands behind him and his face lifted as though he considered something that perplexed him. He came to the steps, knocked with his clenched hand on the door, and, when a voice replied, entered.

Curiosity overcame me. I scurried up to the dark side of the wagon. There a piece of fortune awaited me: a gilded panel had cracked with some jolt upon the road, and by perching myself upon the wheel I could see inside. The old man had been seated behind a table made by letting down a board hinged to the wall. His knives were lying on the floor beside him, bound together in a sheaf with a twine string. There were some packets of old letters on the table and a candle. The little girl lay asleep in a sort of bunk at the end of the wagon. The old man stood up when my uncle entered, and his face, that had been dull and stupid before the justice of the peace, was now keen and bright.

"Monsieur does me an honor," he said. The words were an interrogation with no welcome in them.

"No honor," replied my uncle, standing with his hat on, "but possibly a service."

"That would be strange," the mountebank said dryly, "for I have received no service from any man here."

"You have a short memory," replied Abner; "the justice of the peace rendered you a great service on this day. Do you put no value on your life?"

"My life has not been in danger, monsieur," he said.

"I think it has," replied Abner.

"Then monsieur questions the decision?"

"No," said Abner; "I think it was the very wisest decision that Randolph ever made."

"Then why does monsieur say that my life was in danger?"

"Well," replied my uncle, "are not the lives of all men in danger? Is there any day or hour of a day in which they are secure, or any tract or parcel of this earth where danger is not? And can a man say when he awakes at daylight in his bed, on this day I shall go into danger, or I shall not? In the light it is, and in the darkness it is, and where one looks to find it, and where he does not. Did Blackford believe himself in danger today when he passed before you?"

"Ah, monsieur," replied the man, "that was a terrible accident!"

My uncle picked up a stool, placed it by the table, and sat down. He took off his hat and set it on his knees, then he spoke, looking at the floor.

"Do you believe in God?"

I saw the old man rub his forehead with his hand and the ball of his first finger make a cross.

"Yes, monsieur," he said, "I do."

"Then," replied Abner, "you can hardly believe that things happen out of chance."

"We call it chance, monsieur," said the man, "when we do not understand it."

"Sometimes we use a better term," replied Abner. "Now, today Randolph did not understand this death of Blackford, and yet he called it an act of God."

"Who knows," said the man; "are not the ways of God past finding out?"

"Not always," replied my uncle.

He gathered his chin into his hand and sat for some time motionless; then he continued, "I have found out something about this one."

The old mountebank moved to his stool beyond the table and sat down.

"And what is that, monsieur?" he said.

"That you are in danger of your life—for one thing."

"In what danger?"

"Do you come from the south of Europe," replied Abner, "and forget that when a man is killed there are others to threaten his assassin?"

"But this Blackford has no kin to carry a blood feud," said the mountebank.

"And so," cried Abner, "you knew that before you killed him. And yet, in spite of that precaution, there stood a man in the crowd before the justice of the peace who held your life in his hand. He had but to speak."

"And why did he not speak—this man?" said the mountebank, looking at Abner across the table.

"I will tell you that," replied Abner. "He feared that the justice of the law might contravene the justice of God. It is a fabric woven from many threads—this justice of God. I saw three of these threads today stretching into the great loom, and I feared to touch them lest I disturb the weaver at his work. I saw men see a murder and not know it. I saw a child see its father and not know it, and I saw a letter in the handwriting of a man who did not write it."

The face of the old mountebank did not whiten but instead it grew stern and resolute, and the muscles came out in it so that it seemed a thing of cords under the tanned skin.

"The proofs," he said.

"They are all here," replied Abner.

He stooped, lifted the sheaf of knives, broke the string, and spread

them on the table. He selected the one from which Blackford's blood had been wiped off.

"Randolph examined this knife," he continued, "but not the others; he assumed that they are all alike. Well, they are not. The others are dull, but this one has the edge of a razor."

And he plucked a piece of paper from the table and sheared it in two. Then he put the knife down on the board and looked toward the far end of the wagon.

"And the child's face," he said—"I was not certain of that until I saw Blackford's ironed out under the hand of death, and then I knew. And the letter—"

But the old man was on his feet straining over the table, his features twitching like a taut rope.

"Hush! Hush!" he said.

There came a little gust of wind that whispered in the dry grass and blew the dead leaves against the wagon and about my face. They fluttered like a presence, these dead leaves, and pecked and clawed at the gilded panel like the nails of some feeble hand. I began to be assailed with fear as I sat there alone in the darkness looking in upon this tragedy.

My Uncle Abner sat down, and the old man remained with the palms of his hands pressed against the table. Finally he spoke.

"Monsieur," he said, "shall a man lead another into hell and escape the pit himself? Yes, she is his daughter, and her mother was mine, and I have killed him. He could not speak, but with those letters he persuaded her."

The man paused and turned over the packet of yellow envelopes tied up with faded ribbon.

"And she believed what a woman will always believe. What would you have done, monsieur? Go to the law—your English law that gives the woman a pittance and puts her out of the courthouse door for the ribald to laugh at! Diable! Monsieur, that is not the law. I know the law as my father and my father's father and your father and your father's father knew it. I would have killed him then, when she died, but for this child. I would have followed him into these hills day after day like his shadow behind him until I got a knife into him and ripped him up like a butchered pig. But I could not go to the hangman and leave this child, and so I waited."

He sat down. "We can wait, monsieur. That is one thing we have in my country—patience. And when I was ready, I killed him."

The old man paused and put out his hand, palm upward, on the table. It was a wonderful hand, like a live thing.

"You have eyes, monsieur, but the others are as blind men. Did they think that hand could have failed me? Cunning men have made machin-

ery so accurate that you marvel at them; but there was never a machine with the accuracy of the human hand when it is trained as we train it. Monsieur, I could scratch a line on the door behind you with a needle and with my eyes closed set a knifepoint into every twist and turn of it. Why, monsieur, there was a straw clinging to Blackford's coat—a straw that had fallen on him as he passed some horse stall. I marked it as he came up through the crowd, and I split it with the knife.

"And now, monsieur?"

But my uncle stopped him. "Not yet," he said. "I am concerned about the living and not the dead. If I had thought of the dead only, I should have spoken this day, but I have thought also of the living. What have you done for the child?"

There came a great tenderness into the old man's face.

"I have brought it up in love," he said, "and in honor, and I have got its inheritance for it."

He stopped and indicated the pack of letters.

"I was about to burn these when you came in, monsieur, for they have served their purpose. I thought I might need to know Blackford's hand, and I set out to learn it. Not in a day, monsieur, nor a week, like your common forger, and with an untried hand—but in a year, and years—with a hand that obeys me, I went over and over every letter of every word until I could write the man's hand, not an imitation of it, monsieur, not that, but the very hand itself—the very hand that Blackford writes with his own fingers. And it was well, for I was able to get the child all that Blackford had, beyond his debts, by a letter that no man could know that Blackford did not write."

"I knew that he did not write it," said Abner.

The old man smiled.

"You jest, monsieur," he said; "Blackford himself could not tell the writing from his own. I could not, nor can any living man."

"That is true," replied Abner; "the letter is in Blackford's hand, as he would have written it with his own fingers. It is no imitation, as you say; it is the very writing of the man, and yet he did not write it, and when I saw it, I knew that he did not."

The old man's face was incredulous.

"How could you know that, monsieur?" he said.

My uncle took the letter that my father had received out of his pocket and spread it out on the table.

"I will tell you," he said, "how I knew that Blackford did not write this letter although it is in his very hand. When my brother Rufus showed me this letter and I read it, I noticed that there were words misspelled in it. Well, that of itself was nothing, for the deaf-mute did not always spell correctly. It was the manner in which the words were misspelled. Under the old system, when a deaf-mute was taught to write, he was

taught by the eye; consequently, he writes words as he remembers them to look, and not as he remembers them to sound. His mistakes, then, are mistakes of the eye and not of the ear. And in this he differs from every man who can hear; for the man who can hear, when he is uncertain about the spelling of a word, spells it as it sounds phonetically, using not a letter that looks like the correct one but a letter that sounds like it—using ‘s’ for ‘c’ and ‘o’ for ‘u’—a thing no deaf-mute would ever do in this world because he does not know what letters sound like. Consequently, when I saw the words in this letter misspelled by sound—when I saw that the person who had written this letter remembered his word as a sound and by the arrangement of the letters in it was endeavoring to indicate that sound—I knew he could hear.”

The old man did not reply, but he rose and stood before my uncle. He stood straight and fearless, his long white hair thrown back, his bronzed throat exposed, his face lifted, and his eyes calm and level, like some ancient druid among his sacred oak trees.

And I crowded my face against the cracked panel, straining to hear what he would say.

“Monsieur,” he said, “I have done an act of justice, not as men do it but as the providence of God does it. With care and with patience I have accomplished every act, so that to the eyes of men it bore the relation and aspect of God’s providence. And all who saw were content but you. You have pried and ferreted behind these things, and now you must bear the obligations of your knowledge.”

He spread out his hands toward the sleeping girl.

“Shall this child grow up to honor in ignorance, or in knowledge go down to hell? Shall she know what her mother was, and what her father was, and what I am, and be fouled by the knowledge of it, and shall she be stripped of her inheritance and left not only outlawed, but paupered? And shall I go to the hangman and she to the street? These are things for you to decide, since you would search out what was hidden and reveal what was covered! I leave it in your hands.”

“And I,” replied Abner, rising, “leave it in God’s.”

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



John Morgan Wilson's fourth Benjamin Justice mystery, **Limits of Justice** (Doubleday, \$22.95), opens with a plea from a very persistent young woman named Charlotte Preston. Justice, a former *L.A. Times* investigative reporter, has spent most of the past six months drowning the fact of his H.I.V. positive status with liquor. Preston's adored late father was a matinee idol, and now she's learned that a best-selling biographer known for his hatchet jobs is about to release a scurrilous account of Rod Preston's life. She wants Justice to write a truthful biography as a rebuttal. But when Justice begins to pry into Preston's past, he finds a Pandora's box of perversity involving a number of powerful and highly placed men, at least one of whom will murder anyone set on revealing the truth. Strong characterization, gritty action, and a wry-voiced narrator make Justice a welcome addition to the ranks of tough L.A. private eyes.

In **Advocate** (Bantam, \$23.95), Bill A. Mesce, Jr., and Steven G. Szilagyi take readers on an irresistible journey. It's London in 1943, where JAG Lieutenant Harry Voss, rumped, earnest, and desperately lonely for his New Jersey home and family, is handed the case of two American pilots who are presumed to have gunned down one of their own squad members and then strafed an old English couple who witnessed the incident from their cottage on the coast. As Harry wades through the politics and the missing pieces of evidence that make the case so puzzling, the reader gets an insider's look at a moment in American warfare when any pretense of chivalry, or of the noninvolvement of civilians, was abandoned—subsequently our leaders bombed German and Japanese cities knowing the result to be the loss of tens of thousands of civilian lives. Harry and company are strong guides; the reader cares about the outcome here, tragic though it promises to be. And if this reader still has a few questions about what really *did* happen that day, well then that too is the unreasoning and unreasonable chaos that is war.

(continued on page 142)

THE STORY THAT WON

The June Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Garry Harding of Richmond, British Columbia, Canada. Honorable mentions go to Ron Mayer of St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada; Roberta Ostby of Corvallis, Oregon;



David Magnusson of Hialeah, Florida; Kate Karp of Long Beach, California; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Merl Cook of Lamar, Colorado; and Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland.

Fox Photos/Tony Stone Images

HANDS DOWN by Garry Harding

Smith—as he called himself—had become a bit of a bother as black-mailers often do. He had said that five thousand dollars would remove him from our sight forever, but he had become an optical nightmare, reappearing continually until we thought we were suffering from progressive pernicious myopia.

So, Smith was going to have to become a statistic, as the cliché has it, of the theory of victimology which holds that victims of crimes are often authors of their own misfortune. So, Smith was going to meet misfortune, a nonbeneficent Miss. He was going to develop a medical problem called oxygen deficit.

So, when he arrived again, hand outstretched, we put a glass of Old Red Eye in it. Strange to say, he refused to drink it. But a gun to his temple had a persuasive effect: he consumed two full glasses. In a while he was in good spirits—or, rather, the spirits were in him.

He did object, however, when we held his head down in a tub of seawater—even though it was Pacific Ocean water.

We put Smith in a deck chair on the beach with a partly empty bottle of Old Red Eye in his pocket. Soon he will be underwater. The medical examiner will say that he must have got drunk, fallen asleep, and then the tide came in. Surely all this will be obvious from the seawater in his lungs and the alcohol in his blood. Won't it?

(continued from page 140)

Baltimore private eye Tess Monaghan is back in Laura Lippman's **Sugar House** (Morrow, \$24). At the request of her old-pol father, Tess agrees to work for a waitress whose glue-sniffing kid brother was convicted of killing a teenage girl. The crime is more than a year old, the girl was never identified, and the brother is now dead in a jailhouse killing. The waitress wants to know who the young girl was—nothing more. But tracking down a nameless runaway leads Tess down a dark path of perversion, politics, and violence. Tess is bright, fierce, and good at what she does, and her creator places her in a satisfyingly twisty tale here.

Dick Francis has produced another crowd-pleaser with his latest, **Shattered** (Putnam, \$25.95). Gerard Logan and Martin Stukely are an odd couple, but the friendship between the hardworking glassblower and the successful jockey is undeniable. It would be natural for Logan to mourn the passing of his friend; what is unexpected is that Stukely's death has set a cadre of violent evildoers on Logan's tail. As always, Francis has created a winning protagonist who is gifted with a fascinating professional skill and is endowed with the quick wit and stout heart he will need to survive in this adventure. An enjoyable fast read from the pen of a master.

Donald Harstad is a twenty-six-year veteran of the sheriff's department in northwestern Iowa. With that much experience in the hands of a talented novelist, especially one who sets his books in this familiar territory, Harstad brings to his crime fiction character, color, and credibility. His third book, **The Big Thaw** (Doubleday, \$23.95), plunges the smart and genial Deputy Sheriff Carl Houseman into a labyrinthine plot when his case of missing small-time burglars balloons into a double homicide investigation, an interdepartmental hunt for a terrorist, and a major operation designed to foil a plan to rob five Iowa banks simultaneously. Whew! Even with the imaginative plot and the wide canvas, Harstad and his hero are at their best pounding their local beat. If you're tired of those mean urban streets, head over to Harstad's back roads and deer paths.

Kate Wilhelm's **The Deepest Water** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95) is a quietly compelling suspense novel with engaging characters and a beautifully rendered backdrop. Jud Connors was a late bloomer, but once his daughter Abby grew up and left home, Jud's ambition to get his novels published was not only achieved, he became a bestselling author. The story opens days after Jud's murder in his remote lakeside cabin in Oregon, an apparent victim of an attempted burglary. *The Deepest Water* is about a loving daughter's look into her father's life, facing with adult maturity the fact of his many liaisons with women and prising open secrets in his past for clues leading to the killer. Flashbacks, letters, and passages from Jud's books help Abby and her friends—two remarkable women who also loved the writer—identify a killer. But will it be enough to trap him before he kills again?

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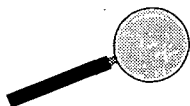
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